White Turrets

By

Mrs. Molesworth

Olive

from "Barkie"

Xmas 1895

'It is quite charming,' she said; 'just the sort of nest one would long to have.'

PAGE 104.

WHITE TURRETS

BY

MRS MOLESWORTH

AUTHOR OF 'CARROTS;' 'OLIVIA;' 'BLANCHE;' 'ROBIN REDBREAST;' 'NEXT-DOOR HOUSE;' ETC.

WITH FOUR ILLUSTRATIONS

BY

W. RAINEY

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WHITE TURRETS.

CHAPTER I.

'HERTHA.'

A DULL afternoon in November. In London, too, where, though bright and beautiful November days are not utterly unknown, they are, it must be allowed, the exception.

A not very lively scene indoors either.

A large—too large for the present purpose at least—concert-room in a public building, very far from well filled, and somewhat dimly lighted; the dimness aggravated by a suspicion of fog.

'Rather an unlucky day, I fear,' said one lady to her next neighbour. 'Still, at this season, what can one expect?'

'And after all,' was the reply, 'the dull season is the best for charity things. People—such of

them as are in town—are glad of something to do.'

For the concert was one for a benevolent object, not seemingly a very popular one, or possibly merely but little known. It had been difficult to collect the performers, more difficult to obtain the lady patronesses, most difficult of all to sell the tickets. And as a natural consequence, but few had been sold.

'The programme is a very fair one,' resumed the first speaker, glancing at it as she spoke.

'I'm glad you think so,' replied the other lady, who had had some hand in getting up the concert. 'That last violin solo was a little too long.'

'Perhaps so—but still—the audience was very attentive; more than attentive indeed. Just look at those two girls—I have been watching their faces. They seem quite absorbed and delighted. Look at them now. What pretty girls they are, too!'

Mrs Balderson—for such was the name of the second speaker—smiled. Her companion's remarks pleased her.

'They are two young friends of mine,' she replied in a lower tone. 'I put them in front so as to see the performers well. They are full of interest in everything. They are staying with me

for two or three weeks—their first real visit to London.'

'Indeed! how you must enjoy having them! Are they relations?' came next.

Mrs Balderson answered in a semi-whisper, till a slight rustle of expectancy warned her that the momentary interval between the long solo and a song which came next was over, and she relapsed into dutiful silence.

The sisters in front had been talking also, though in subdued tones.

'Celia,' said the elder of the two, a handsome, eager-faced girl, with brown hair and eyes—'Celia, are we not lucky? Do you see what the first song is?'

'I saw it ever so long ago, but I did not tell you. I thought it would be such a surprise. I wish you hadn't seen it till you heard it,' said the younger girl.

'What an Irishism!' returned the other, laughing. 'You mustn't count on my short-sightedness, you see;' for Winifred, the elder girl, was a trifle short-sighted. 'I am very glad I saw it; I like the pleasures of anticipation.'

She did not look her age, though she was fond of impressing upon her friends that she was 'no longer very young.' Her complexion and the

rounded outlines of her face might have been in keeping with seventeen or eighteen. Only a certain tone of decision, a slight, very slight touch of brusqueness, made her twenty-four years credible. Late hours and heated rooms, the wear and tear of over-amusement or over-excitement, had nothing to answer for in the case of these country girls—country girls, in a sense, of the old-fashioned kind.

Celia, who was not yet twenty, was prettier than her sister; taller and fairer—a more flower-like creature—with an entire absence of self-consciousness, born to a certain extent, perhaps, of her absolute reliance upon Winifred, which added curiously to her charm.

'So do I,' she replied. 'I like to know the name of the singer and to picture her to myself beforehand—especially when she is going to sing anything one loves *so* dearly as'—— and she mentioned the song (an old ballad which I will not name, as I should like my readers to think of *the* old ballad they care for most). 'If she is ugly or ungraceful, I shall just shut my eyes after the first glance and try to forget her. But her name is—pretty? no, not exactly, but nice, somehow, and rather queer. "Hertha Norreys." Did you ever hear it before, Winifred?'

'"Norreys," spelt like that, is a very good name,' said Winifred the all-wise, 'but "Hertha!" What is it I know about "Hertha?" We must look it out in our "Christian names," Celia, when'——

But a touch on her arm from the quicker-eyed Celia silenced her, and like their chaperon and her friend, they grew mute, more than mute, motionless with interest which soon developed into an intenser feeling, as they watched the newcomer quietly making her way to the front of the platform. Saw her, and soon *heard* her. Yet the two perceptions seemed almost as one. From that first day, it was and ever remained to both —to Winifred especially, perhaps—impossible to think of Hertha Norreys in her absence except as singing, impossible to hear elsewhere the familiar notes of her favourite songs without seeing *her*.

For her songs, as a rule, were well known and simple; ballads familiar to most of us—the kind of thing which is, in great measure, 'made' by the artist; which may be 'marred' into utter nonentity.

And she was not—no, certainly not—'pretty,' and by no means 'to the multitude' beautiful, though the word describes less inadequately than a poorer one the impression she made on the 'some;' an impression which, after knowledge of

her, never lessened or effaced. She was not very tall, though of what used to be considered more than average height for a woman: nothing in or about her was startling or even striking. Her features, though in almost perfect proportion —perhaps for that very reason—never provoked admiration of their individual merits; her eyes, clear and sweet, could light up with affection or with occasionally a flash of consciousness almost approaching the inspiration of genius, into rare beauty; her whole face, her whole personality, spoke above all of simple yet powerful goodness, the true, large-hearted, thoughtful goodness of a noble woman.

At this time Hertha Norreys was twenty-eight.

The Maryon sisters—for Maryon was their surname—sat, as I said, in more than silence, while the wonderful—yes, wonderful I must call them in their perfect purity and sweetness—notes floated over them; now in joyousness, now in pathos, to die away at last in unutterable regret, as dies the wind on an autumn evening.

She was encored, of course. Though not in the first ranks of vocalists, for her voice was of no astounding compass, Miss Norreys was allowed on all hands to be 'very good, very good indeed in her way,' and in herself she was a favourite with

many, though not with all; so it was the proper thing, especially on an occasion like the present, when she gave her services gratuitously, to applaud her heartily.

And till she had reappeared and sung again the last verse of the ballad, neither Winifred nor Celia spoke or moved.

Then came—from Celia—the first half-timid words.

'I am so glad she sang the last verse over again,' she whispered. 'Anything else would have spoilt it.'

'Of course,' said Winifred, and her tone was a little impatient. But in a moment, ashamed of her hastiness, she spoke again. 'Oh, Celia,' she said, 'I am not cross. But I seem so—so worked up. Isn't she *wonderful?* Not her singing only—and after all, I know you understand music better than I do—but the whole of her, her face, her way of moving, even her dress! It was just perfect.'

'Blue-gray bengaline—that lovely shade,' said Celia, in whom there was now and then a queer, sudden matter-of-fact-ness which a superficial observer would rather have expected to find in Winifred. 'And it fitted so well—so naturally, you know.'

Everything about her is natural—that's the

beauty of it,' Winifred replied, repressing her indignation at hearing the texture of her divinity's garments put into vulgar words. ('I wonder Celia does not tell me how many yards of stuff there must be in the dress,' she said to herself.) 'Everything about her is natural—at least in perfect harmony,' she repeated, and then she gave a deep sigh. 'Celia, is she to sing again?' she inquired in a low voice.

'Yes,' Celia replied, consulting the programme she held, 'once—no, twice—once alone and another time in a trio, or quartette rather. I daresay it is some kind of glee: the name sounds like that.'

'I shall not care for that,' said Winifred, 'but oh, I am so glad she is to sing again alone.'

She did care for the quartette when it came, for Miss Norreys' voice was far ahead of the others, and then there was the pleasure of seeing her! And the third time she sang, the impression of the first was intensified, for though the song itself was a gayer one, the indescribable pathos of her voice was there too—it was as if a spirit were singing of joys which had once been his, long ago, in some golden age of childhood.

After that, Winifred, though she sat silent and apparently attentive, heard but little of the music.

Then came the little bustle of collecting discarded cloaks and furs, and the interchange of remarks upon the performance, as the 'assistants,' in the French sense, most of whom were women, made their way to the door.

'Winifred, my dear, Celia,' said their hostess, when they were waiting with her for the carriage at the entrance, 'I want to introduce you to my friend, Lady Campion.'

'You have enjoyed the concert, I think,' said the stranger—the same whose remarks about the Maryon girls had pleased Mrs Balderson.

'Very much, oh, very, *very* much,' both sisters replied.

Their chaperon gave a little smile of satisfaction as she glanced at Lady Campion.

'There's some pleasure in having girls like these to take about, isn't there?' the smile and glance seemed to say, and the answering expression in Lady Campion's bright eyes showed that she understood.

'It is cold, isn't it?' said Mrs Balderson, drawing her fur-lined cloak more closely round her, with a slight shiver.

'It *looks* cold,' replied Lady Campion, as she glanced up and down the street where the incipient fog veiling the dim red still lingering in

the sky, and the yellow glare of the just-lighted lamps, gave a curious, half-mysterious effect, not without its charm. 'It looks cold,' she repeated, 'but I don't think that it really is so.'

'It was beautifully warm in the concert-room,' said Winifred. 'London is so much less chilly than the country just now. It *is* so delightful to be here.'

'Yet the country is often charming in November: there are days when one longs to sit out sketching,' said Lady Campion, who tried her hand at painting as well as at several other accomplishments. 'The hazy colouring is so wonderful sometimes.'

'If I were an artist,' said Celia, who had not yet spoken, 'I should like nothing better than to try *London* effects on a day like this. I never saw anything more curious than the lights just now.'

Lady Campion glanced at her in some surprise. There was a touch of originality in the remark which she had not expected, for she had already in her own mind put down Celia as 'the pretty sister,' and Winifred as 'the clever one.'

Just then Mrs Balderson's footman hurried up to announce the carriage.

'Good-bye, so glad to have met you,' said his

mistress, as she began to shake hands with her friend. 'But—how are you going home?' she added suddenly. 'You are driving, of course?'

'No, that is to say I have no carriage here. I am going to get a hansom,' replied the younger woman.

'Then do come with us, and let us drop you. It will not be out of our way at all,' said Mrs Balderson, cordially. 'There is plenty of room for us all.'

'Thank you very much. Well, yes, it would be very nice,' replied Lady Campion, who felt rather pleased to see a little more of the two girls. They interested her, and she liked to be interested.

So in another moment or two the four found themselves comfortably ensconced in the landau, which, like everything belonging to Mrs Balderson, gave one a not unpleasing impression of space and plenty—of a rather old-fashioned kind.

'You are not tired, my dear Winifred? You have not got a headache, I hope?' said her hostess. For Miss Maryon was sitting silent with an absent look.

The girl started, then she smiled brightly. Her smile was very pleasant, relieving her face from the heaviness which in repose was its possible defect. And she had beautiful teeth!

'Oh dear, no,' she replied. 'I never have headaches. None of us do, except Louise, and that very, very seldom. I was—only thinking.'

'I know,' said Celia. 'Mrs Balderson, shall I tell you what it is? Winifred has fallen in love, and at first sight.'

'My dear!' exclaimed Mrs Balderson, rather taken aback, while Lady Campion listened with a quiet smile, her interest and amusement increasing.

'Yes,' Celia went on, unabashed, 'and so have I, though not quite so badly, perhaps. It is Miss Norreys—Miss Hertha Norreys, the singer.'

Mrs Balderson's face cleared.

'She is so—I can't find a word for her,' said Winifred, half apologetically, but tacitly pleading guilty to her sister's impeachment. 'Isn't she wonderful, Mrs Balderson?—*you* think her so, I am sure; don't you?' she went on, turning to Lady Campion, in whose face she fancied she read quicker sympathy.

'I think she sings charmingly, in her own way,' began the elder woman, who was by no means ignorant of music; 'and in herself she is, of course, most'——

'No, no; I agree with Miss Maryon,' interrupted Lady Campion, but in a pretty eager way

peculiar to her, which took away all shadow of offensiveness from the solecism. 'Hertha Norreys, take her all together, *is* wonderful. I know no one the least, the very least like her.'

'You know her, then?' exclaimed Winifred, her eyes sparkling. 'You know her privately?'

'Is it her real name?' added Celia. 'I thought actors and singers always changed their names, or at least altered them somehow.'

'Not always—more often indeed not now-a-days, when they are of her class and position,' Lady Campion replied. 'She is an "artist," so to say, of the modern school, retaining all the privileges that are hers by birth, except—and that "except," I fear, means a great deal—that she is, or would be if she did nothing, very poor.'

'If she did nothing?' repeated Winifred, musingly. 'What a different'—then she broke off hurriedly, asking again—'You know her? Privately—personally, I mean?'

Lady Campion nodded her head.

'I have that honour,' she said quaintly. 'And an honour it is. But here we are at my own door. A thousand thanks, dear Mrs Balderson; but—now, won't you do me another kindness? Come in and have tea with me, and I shall be able to

tell our young friends a little more about my dear Hertha.'

Mrs Balderson hesitated. Her first impulse was always to do whatever she was asked to do, if such doing, that is to say, promised to give pleasure to the asker or any one else concerned. But, as often happened—for she had learned by experience—there came second thoughts.

'I fear I must not,' she said. 'Mr Balderson and Eric are coming home early. Eric has some accompaniments he wants me to try over before dinner. But I should be very glad for you girls to stay half an hour or so with Lady Campion,' she went on, turning to the Maryons. 'I cannot send the carriage back again, I fear, for I have had it out so much to-day, but your footman could see them into a hansom; they would be all right?' she added, reverting to Lady Campion.

'Oh, perfectly. I shall be delighted,' she replied; and the 'delight,' without any polite figure of speech, shone in Winifred's eyes, as she eagerly repeated the word 'perfectly,' adding—'That will be charming. Celia and I want very much to go about a little alone in hansoms—to learn to manage for ourselves.'

But Celia hesitated.

'Winifred,' she said, I think one of us *should*

write home. We only sent a postcard of our arrival last night, and they will be so looking forward to a letter to-morrow morning. I had planned to write just now as soon as we go in. Might I—could *I* go home with you, dear Mrs Balderson, and—and Winifred stay with'——

She spoke nervously, for she *felt* her sister's disapproval.

'Certainly not,' said Miss Maryon, decidedly. 'Of course, if any one writes, it must be me. Not that I think it necessary—in fact, you are absurd, Celia. But still, as you have got it into your head—— Thank you a thousand times,' she went on, turning to Lady Campion with a frank heartiness which was one of her attractions. 'I am ashamed to make such a fuss. Perhaps Celia is right, but—you will ask us again to come to see you, I hope? I should so enjoy it, and I long to hear about Miss Norreys.'

'I like the elder girl best,' thought Lady Campion, as she entered her own house. 'She is so entirely unaffected: the other, it strikes me, is a bit of a prig.'

But it is not the mark of a prig to look guilty; and poor Celia looked decidedly guilty as they drove off again. Mrs Balderson, gifted with the kind of tact which comes from an extremely warm

heart, exerted herself to disperse the little cloud which had arisen, by giving her young friends a few details about Lady Campion.

'She is so clever,' she said; 'she can do almost anything she sets herself to. But I think she takes up too many things. She has no children, and few responsibilities; for they are not very rich—just comfortably off—and her husband is much older than she, and manages everything, so her time is greatly in her own hands.'

'*What* a pity she married!' exclaimed Winifred, with extreme conviction. 'She might have been really great at something, if she had not thrown herself into trammels.'

Mrs Balderson smiled, but there was some perplexity in her smile.

'My dear!' she exclaimed, 'you don't mean to say that that is how you look upon marriage—a happy marriage, too, for Sir Hugh Campion is devoted to his wife and she to him, only he spoils her a little.'

'Ah, yes,' said Winifred, 'a plaything when not a slave! I have my own ideas, dear Mrs Balderson, but you mustn't be shocked at me. You must allow that happy marriages are rare.'

'If you mean perfect marriages, perhaps so. But happy marriages—no, I can't agree with you.

I know as many happy-together husbands and wives as mothers and daughters, or brothers and sisters, or any other relations,' said Mrs Balderson.

'I am using the word "happy" in a wider and deeper sense than yours,' said Winifred, a little loftily. 'But we must talk about it some other time. I flatter myself I have thought it out pretty thoroughly.'

'At one—no, two-and-twenty?' said her hostess, with a good-humoured smile.

'I am four-and-twenty—past,' said Winifred.

They had reached Mrs Balderson's house by this time.

'Come and have some tea before you take off your things,' she said. 'It is sure to be ready. And then you can write your letters up-stairs if you like. I hope the servants keep up a good fire in your room, Winifred?'

'Oh dear yes,' said Winifred. 'Not that we really need one. London houses are so much warmer than country ones, you know.'

'Yes—we have a few advantages over you, I allow,' said Mrs Balderson. 'This house is very warm though it is commonplace. But even that must be a change to you after your wonderful old home, with its quaint nooks and crannies and odd-shaped rooms, inexplicable staircases, and—oh, that

reminds me. You must tell Lady Campion all about your ghost when we see her again. Ghosts are one of her manias.'

A slight frown showed itself on Winifred's face at the words.

'You know I don't believe in it,' she said. 'It is so silly.'

'Oh, Winifred, don't say that,' exclaimed Celia, with sudden anxiety. 'It always frightens me a little when you speak so.'

CHAPTER II.

BLACK AND PINK.

ERIC BALDERSON was awaiting his mother—not impatiently, he was never impatient about anything—in the drawing-room, as she had foreseen when they went in. And so was tea, thanks to Eric. He was one of those people in whose case it is not difficult to take the bad with the good, for the latter so decidedly predominated. If slow, tiresomely slow sometimes, he was so considerate; if in a certain sense heavy, he was so entirely to be relied upon, and in unselfish thoughtfulness for others, above all in small matters—for in important ones I cannot endorse the popular axiom that 'the best of men are selfish'—he was almost like a woman.

'Now, isn't that nice?' said his mother, appreciatively. 'Tea *just* ready. You *are* clever, Eric. Isn't he a good boy, Winifred? Of course

it 's all due to my splendid bringing up, but still he does me credit, doesn't he ?'

Winifred smiled, but did not speak. She knew he was excellent, but she did not care much for Eric Balderson. Celia liked him better.

'I suppose you have learned to be daughter as well as son to your mother,' she said quietly, as she stood by the table, while this very 'tame-cat' young man, as Winifred contemptuously called him, poured out the tea for his mother and her young friends.

'Yes, that 's to say she has had to put up with my feeble efforts in that direction, failing better,' he said. 'Now then, I think I have got hers—my mother's—tea just as she likes it; will you be so good as to tell me of any peculiarities of taste of yours, or your sister's—cream, sugar, both or neither, or which ?'

'Winifred takes no cream—I take both. Yes, I will hand Mrs Balderson hers, and you can look after Winifred. This is mine ? Thank you,' and Celia seated herself near the tea-table.

'Did you enjoy the concert this afternoon ?' young Mr Balderson inquired. 'It was a concert you were at, wasn't it ?'

'Oh yes, very much, very much indeed,' said Celia. 'It was a very nice concert. But *the*

'I suppose you have learned to be daughter as well as son to your mother,' she said quietly.

thing that we cared for most was Miss Norreys' singing.'

'Miss Norreys — Hertha Norreys, do you mean?'

'Yes,' said Mrs Balderson, 'these girls have both fallen in love with her, Eric.'

'With *her* as well as with her singing,' said Winifred.

Eric looked up with a comical expression.

'She is very charming, I am told,' he said. 'I cannot testify to the fact from personal experience, for you can't exactly call a person charming who deliberately snubs you.'

'How do you mean?' said his mother. 'I didn't know you had ever met Miss Norreys, and if you have, why should you think she snubbed you?'

'Because she did,' Eric replied simply.

Winifred's eyes sparkled. Her admiration for Hertha rose still higher.

'Just what I should have expected of her,' she thought to herself.

'My dear Eric,' said his mother, with a very slight touch of annoyance in her tone, 'I think you talk nonsense sometimes.'

He smiled.

'Sometimes, perhaps, but not always,' he said.

But he rose from his seat as he spoke, for he was more than quick at reading his mother's feelings, and went towards the piano.

'I'll look out the songs, mother, that I want to try over,' he remarked. 'That's to say, if you are still good for a little practising before dinner.'

'Certainly I am. Indeed, we hurried home partly on that account,' Mrs Balderson replied. 'I will run up-stairs and take off my things in a moment. And you, dears, will have a little quiet time for your letters, and for resting, if you are tired.'

'I shall be glad to write my letters, but I am not the least tired, thank you,' said Winifred, in her clear, slightly incisive tone, almost as if resenting the kindly imputation.

'I *am*, rather,' said Celia gently.

'I scarcely see how you could help it, after such a busy day,' agreed Mrs Balderson. 'You have been on the go since early this morning. Such a contrast from your regular restful life at home. Not that we Londoners can stand so much fatigue as country people often imagine we can, fancying that a rush is our usual existence.' She was leaving the room as she spoke, but stopped to add, 'Remember I want you to be fresh this evening,

though it is only a small party. Your cousin is coming, for one.'

'Oh dear,' said Winifred, in a half-complaining voice, when her hostess had gone, 'I forgot about Lennox being in London just now. Mrs Balderson really need not have troubled to ask him. We have quite enough of him at home.'

Eric glanced at her.

'I fear we can scarcely put him off now, except with grave discourtesy,' he said. And Winifred could not tell if he was laughing at her or not. 'Besides,' he went on, 'though I cannot hope the fact would carry any weight with it, I am very fond of Lennox. I do my best to see something of him whenever I get a chance.'

'Oh yes,' said Winifred, coolly, 'I know you and he are chums. Well, as long as he does not sit beside me at dinner and entertain me with questions about the cows and the pigs and the old women at home, whom I am more than thankful to forget for a week or two'——

'He shall not sit beside you at dinner; so much I can guarantee,' said Eric. And though Winifred thanked him laughingly, as if all that had been said was a joke, she did not entirely disagree with Celia's first observation when they found themselves alone in their own room.

'Winifred,' said Celia, 'I think Mr Eric Balderson was *really* rather angry at your tone about Lennox. I heard it in his voice, though he has that dry way of speaking that makes it difficult to know whether he is in fun or earnest.'

She was standing in front of the fire—a brightly glowing one—in the large room, which, with a dressing-room out of it, the two girls shared together. And as she spoke she turned round slowly, and looked at her sister half timidly.

'Well, and what if he were?' said Winifred. 'After all, Lennox is our cousin, not his. He does not need to take up the cudgels in the poor dear's defence. It would be very impertinent.'

'He would not mean it that way,' said Celia, 'and though you are so much cleverer and wiser than I, you know, Winifred, onlookers sometimes see the most. Don't you think, considering how things are with Lennox, it would be better always to speak very nicely of him? After all, his caring for you is no crime—you need not *despise* him for it.'

'Oh, bother!' said Winifred, throwing herself back into a comfortable chintz-covered arm-chair, 'perhaps it would be better. But I hate beating about the bush and always thinking such a lot

about what to say and not to say. I do like to be natural. However, I'll be more careful. But I am so tired of Lennox and all that dull, humdrum country life that Mrs Balderson calls restful and delightful. And so are you, Celia; we are at one on these subjects.'

'Of course we are,' said the younger girl, 'though my feeling is not that I want to leave home, but simply to have—you know what—my chance, my test, which I *cannot* have at home. But you are very good, dear Winifred, not to think *me* impertinent for warning you.'

For a moment or two there was silence.

Then said Winifred, raising herself, 'I must write to mamma.'

A shadow of disappointment flitted across Celia's face, but there was no trace of it in her voice.

'To mamma?' she said. 'Oh, then, I will write to Louise.'

'Of course,' said Winifred, majestically. 'It would never do for *me* not to write first to mamma. Indeed, I don't see that there is any hurry for your writing at all.'

She got out her paper and pens as she spoke. Then with the queer mixture of candid self-depreciation which existed in her, side by side

with unusual self-assertion, she startled Celia by an unexpected speech.

'About what you were saying of Lennox just now, Celia,' she began, her fingers toying idly with the pen she had already dipped into the ink, 'do you know, at the bottom of my heart, I don't think I believe that he *does* care for me?'

Celia gasped.

'Winifred,' she exclaimed, 'that is going too far. Whatever he is *not*, he is certainly not a mean hypocrite. You can't think that for—for any selfish or interested motives, he would *pretend* to care for you? He couldn't.'

'No, no, I don't think him the least of a hypocrite,' said Winifred, eagerly. 'You don't understand, Celia. He *thinks* he does, quite honestly. He's always been put in the position—not told he *must* care for me, for, of course, with a man of any spirit or principle that would only drive him the other way. And Lennox has plenty of principle and spirit too, of a kind. But he has been tacitly told he *does*, and so he has come to believe it.'

Celia looked extremely perplexed. This was a new light indeed upon the subject, but a light which seemed, at first at any rate, only to increase the already existing perplexity.

'If—if you think *that*,' she said at last, 'I don't wonder at what you always say about him. I mean about it all. Not that I don't sympathise with you—I do, as you know. I *couldn't* imagine being in love with Lennox;' and she smiled to herself, as it were, at the very thought. 'But I always thought it must make a great difference if a girl knows a man is very devoted to *her*, you know.'

'Oh,' said Winifred, in her very off-hand way, 'as far as that goes, I *think* I could stand Lennox better if I knew he did not care much for me,' which paradoxical speech gave her younger sister considerable food for reflection. And before Celia spoke again, Winifred dismissed the subject in her high-handed fashion, quite ignoring the fact that it was she herself, and she alone, who had started the conversation.

'You really must not chatter or let me chatter any more, Celia,' she said. 'I must get my letter written.'

And for the best part of an hour there was no sound to be heard but the scratching of their pens—of Winifred's pen alone after a while, for Celia's correspondence was confined to her sister Louise, while Miss Maryon, once she had got her hand in, so to say, went on writing long after her

rather short and not very graphic letter to her mother was finished. For she was a young woman of great energy and almost perfect physical condition. It was quite true, as she had declared to Mrs Balderson, that she was not 'the very least tired.'

She looked up suddenly, when she had closed and addressed her fourth envelope.

'It must be getting rather late,' she said. 'Shall I ring for our letters to be taken down, do you think, Celia? They are not in time for to-night's mail, but still, if posted now, they will get to Barleyfield for the afternoon delivery to-morrow.'

But to her question there came no reply, and looking up, the silence was quickly explained to her. Celia was fast asleep! Her pretty head supported by her arm, which had found a resting-place on the end of a sofa standing by, she was far away in some happy dreamland probably, to judge by the half-smile upon her face, and the calm, childlike softness of her breathing.

'Poor little Celia,' said Winifred to herself. 'How sweet she looks!' and with deft and gentle hand she moved the couch, so that the fair head itself could lean on the cushion. 'Let me

see,' she went on, glancing at the clock on the mantelpiece, 'a quarter—no, five minutes to seven. I will run down with the letters so as not to wake her by ringing, and then I will let her sleep till a quarter past. She will be all the brighter for it afterwards.'

Bright, and better than bright—each charming in her own way—looked the two girls an hour later when they entered the drawing-room again, where their hostess and her husband, a thin, elderly man, with pleasant, luminous blue eyes, and gray hair rapidly turning to white, were having a consultation after the orthodox conjugal fashion as to 'who takes whom' down to dinner.

'At my left, you say, my dear? Young Mrs Fancourt at my left?—oh yes, Lennox Maryon takes her. Why, I thought'—— Mr Balderson was saying, when the opening of the door made him stop abruptly, looking after the manner of men decidedly guilty, as an admonitory 'sh' from his wife warned him that the new-comers were his young guests.

'That's right,' said Mrs Balderson, heartily. 'Good girls. I like to have my home party about me on these little occasions. What can that lazy Eric be doing? He is not generally so late.'

The delinquent entered as she spoke—before, indeed, the door had closed behind the two sisters. He came quietly into the room with some little laughing rejoinder to his mother, and walked over to where Mr Balderson was standing, without seeming to notice either Winifred or Celia in any special way. Yet Celia was perfectly aware that even as he passed them he took in every detail of their appearance and attire.

'I hope he thinks we are nicely dressed,' she thought, though she would not have liked Winifred to read her unspoken reflection. 'I suspect he is rather critical, though in a nice way. Well, Winifred looks very pretty, I am sure, but I wish she were not quite so fond of black.'

Yes, Winifred looked very well indeed, for, though her black dress was almost severely simple, it was of rich material and fitted well. This was in accordance with Miss Maryon's principles. She would have scorned to spend much time or thought upon her clothes, still shabbiness or dowdiness or eccentricity she did not consider a fitting accompaniment of woman as she should be. The worst that could be said of her way of dressing was that it was far too old, and on the whole monotonous. But to strangers this latter defect was naturally absent, and perhaps the very

heaviness and stiffness of style she affected had practically the opposite result of making the girl herself look all the younger.

However that may have been, she was genuinely indifferent about herself; to-night her thoughts were more on dress than usual, nevertheless, for she was exceedingly interested in Celia's appearance, and, considering her theories, almost inconsistently eager that she should be admired.

'Does she not look lovely?' she could not help whispering to Mrs Balderson, and her whole face sparkled with pleasure when there came the hearty reply.

'*Most* lovely; that pale pink suits her to perfection, and'—— But the rest of the kind woman's admiration remained unexpressed, for at that moment some of her guests were announced, and she had to hasten forward to meet them. Others followed quickly, causing a little bustle in the room, under cover of which a young man made his way in quietly; not sorry to do so, if the truth were told, for Mr Lennox Maryon, very much at home in the hunting-field or at a steeplechase, was decidedly shy in a London drawing-room. Nor was the consciousness of his cousin Winifred's observant, albeit short-sighted, brown eyes, likely to put him more at his ease.

He was in luck, however, on the present occasion. Both Winifred and Celia were for the moment somewhat apart from the Baldersons and their other guests, feeling, perhaps, as perfect strangers to the latter, just a little 'out of it.' Lennox hurried up to them with great satisfaction, though not without a touch of the nervousness which somehow always hovered about him when near Winifred.

'*How* are you?' he said with somewhat unnecessary emphasis, considering there was not the slightest need for anxiety as to the state of health of either of the girls. 'So delighted to find you here. When did you come up? left all well at home, eh?'

'One question at a time, please, Lennox, if you have no objection,' said Winifred, coldly. 'Not that any of yours strike me as very important; we came up yesterday, and we are both perfectly well, and as you saw everybody at home the day before, there is no reason for special anxiety about their health that I can see.'

Lennox gave a half-awkward little laugh. What he was laughing at he could not have told, but he took it for granted that Winifred's speeches had something clever in them, and the laugh helped to hide his shyness. And he did not over-

hear Celia's reproachful tone as she whispered in her sister's ear:

'Winifred, how can you? Poor old Lennox.'—'We are enjoying ourselves very much indeed, Lennox, you will be glad to hear,' the younger girl said brightly. 'I can scarcely believe we only left them all yesterday. It is delightful to see a home face again.'

The young man turned to her gratefully, his handsome, rather sunburnt features lighting up with a very pleasant smile.

'Good little Celia,' he said approvingly. 'I don't believe there's much fear of *your* falling in love with London.'

There was a little bitterness underlying the accent he put on the pronoun. Winifred heard it, and was ready for battle on the spot.

'Celia is absurd,' she exclaimed. 'She is only talking that kind of way to please you, Lennox. Why, the very first thing she said this morning was: "Oh, Winifred, if only we were to be here three months instead of three weeks!" You know it was, Celia.'

'And no harm in it, that I can see, if she did say so,' said Lennox, flushing a little. 'I think London's very good fun, myself, once in a way.'

He could pluck up a spirit now and then with Winifred, but I scarcely think it profited him much.

'Very good fun!' she repeated. 'You do express yourself so oddly, Lennox. I am afraid our ideas on the subject of London are not more likely to agree than on'——

But a touch on her arm stopped her. Celia was drawing her attention to the fact that Mr Balderson was on the point of introducing a man to her. An elderly, or at least middle-aged, man, whose name was known to her as that of a distinguished-in-his-own-line writer.

'Mr Sunningdale—Miss Maryon.'

The middle-aged man bowed somewhat absently. He dined out most nights of his life; he saw only a young woman in black, whom he did not remember ever having seen before, and he had been interrupted in a conversation, at the other side of the room, with a woman he knew well, whose conversation always amused him. These little *contretemps* will happen in the best-regulated houses. He was not an ill-tempered man, and resigned himself to fate. But Winifred's face, on the contrary, changed from steely coldness to sunshine. You would scarcely have recognised her for the same girl, as she replied to some little

commonplace observation of the great man's with her most winning manner.

'Good eyes,' thought he to himself, 'I hope I shall not need to talk to her much;' while Winifred, in a flutter of gratification, was saying to herself how very kind it was of Mrs Balderson to have given her to Mr Sunningdale, of all people, to take her in to dinner.

Lennox moved away with a little sigh, which Celia heard, though it was all but inaudible. The girl's tender heart quivered for him, for she was far from endorsing her elder sister's startling suggestion that Lennox did not really 'care for her.'

'He is just devoted to her—quite devoted,' thought Celia. 'How unlucky it seems! These things generally go that way, I suppose; at least, if what one reads in novels is true. I hope that I shall never care for any one, and that no one will care for me, for it would be sure to be only on one side or the other.'

She had no time to say anything consoling or sympathising to her cousin—indeed, what could she have said?—for he was already told off to his lady, the young Mrs Fancourt, whom Mr Balderson had alluded to; and Celia herself was soon appropriated by the husband of the pretty little

woman in question, on whose arm she made her way down-stairs.

She had scarcely looked at him ; she was thinking so much of Winifred and Lennox, that she was quite indifferent about her own fate, and Mr Fancourt, a good-natured man, whose rather limited ideas were entirely absorbed by admiration for his wife, soon gave her up as decidedly dull and heavy. Celia did not care—she had plenty to think of and plenty to amuse herself with ; she was rather glad when her monosyllables resulted in Mr Fancourt's directing his attentions to the woman on his other side. And one or two courses had been removed before a voice on her right hand startled her into realising that she had a neighbour in that quarter too.

'Miss Maryon, what are you thinking about so intently?' were the words she heard. 'I have been watching you for quite five minutes—you are in a regular brown study.'

Celia started, then smiled, and, finally, as she became satisfied that Eric—for it was he—was not really shocked at her, could not repress a little laugh.

'I am so sorry,' she said. 'Why didn't you speak to me before? I didn't even know you were there.'

'So I saw—at least, I hoped it was so—that there was no special motive in the resolute way in which you turned a cold shoulder upon me, and'——

'No,' said Celia, laughing again, 'my shoulders are not at all cold, thank you. This part of the room is delightfully out of any draught.'

'And,' continued Eric, 'fixed your eyes upon the flowers in front of you, and let your thoughts wander to—— No! that I can't guess. I wonder where they were wandering to.'

CHAPTER III.

AT THE DINNER-TABLE.

'NOT very far,' said Celia, smiling, and colouring a little. 'I was very much entertained by watching all the people round the table, and perhaps I was thinking mostly of poor old Len.'

Eric looked across in young Maryon's direction.

'Why do you say "*poor* old Len?"' he inquired. 'I think he 's quite happy. Mrs Fancourt seems to be drawing him out beautifully.'

Celia glanced at her companion doubtfully.

'Do you really think so?' she asked, 'or are you saying it to—to draw *me* out?'

'I really think so, and I don't need to draw you out,' he replied. 'I know exactly what you mean about Lennox, and—you needn't pity him. It will be all right.'

'Oh, I am afraid not,' said Celia. 'I 'm afraid it will never come right. I didn't know you knew

about it, but as you do—no,' and her voice dropped almost to a whisper, 'Winifred will *never* care for him. I see it more and more, and now she is thinking all sorts of things—quite differently, you know.'

'Indeed,' said Eric, raising his eyebrows in inquiry, 'do you mean—is there—some other more fortunate person in the field?'

'No, no, not that at all,' said Celia. 'Winifred has much higher ideas than most girls. She wants to make a path for herself—to feel that she is doing something with her life—and she must be right. Why should girls be condemned to do and be nothing? A young man without a profession is always considered the greatest mistake. Why should women be forced into leading idle and useless lives?'

'They never should be,' said Eric, 'I quite agree with you. But there are considerations: if a girl *does* marry, you will allow that she finds her work cut out for her—her vocation or profession, or whatever you like to call it. And I do not think any woman has a right to cast herself adrift from the *chances* of marrying, so to say; she should allow herself fair-play.'

Celia gave her head the tiniest of tosses.

'Winifred does not want to marry, and she is

old enough to judge,' she said. 'I don't deny—well, honestly, I should have been very happy if she had married Lennox, that is to say, if she could have cared for him. It would have pleased a good many people, and—did you ever hear the legend of White Turrets?' she went on, dropping her voice, and looking half-frightened at herself.

'No,' said Eric, with interest. 'I've heard something about its being haunted, like nearly all very old houses, but I never heard of any legend.'

'Ah, well, there is one. It and the ghost are mixed up together,' said Celia, still in a slightly awe-struck tone. 'It—*she* is supposed to be the spirit of an ancestress of ours, who was cruelly treated because she had no son. She had two or three daughters, and she died soon after the last was born, and she left a sort of a curse. No,' with a little shudder, 'I don't like to call it that. It was more like a'——

'A prophecy,' suggested Eric.

'Yes,' said Celia, her face clearing, 'it was more like that. It was to warn her descendants that the luck, so to say, should run in the female line, and that whenever a man was the owner of the place, the Maryons might'——

'Look out for squalls,' Eric could not resist adding.

Celia glanced at him half indignantly.

'If you're laughing at me,' she said, 'I won't tell it you.'

'I beg your pardon, I do really,' he said, penitently. 'It was only that I did not like to see you looking so solemn about it.'

'I can't help it,' said the girl, simply. 'It always makes me a little frightened, though I know it's silly. Winifred gets quite vexed if it is mentioned. She says it is contemptible nonsense. Louise believes it, but she is so good, it doesn't frighten her. Still, for other reasons, we seldom allude to it. It has come *so* true, over and over again: I could tell you lots of things. Papa, you know, has had heaps of trouble. Poor papa, just think what a life of endurance his is! So you see if—if Winifred could have married Lennox (he is our second cousin, you know), it would have done so well—keeping the old name, and she being the owner of the place.'

'I see,' said young Balderson.

'Or even if she could have been a more ordinary sort of girl, content to settle down at home,' Celia went on, 'for'—and here the frightened look came over her face again—'there's more in the legend:

the worst luck of all is to come if a woman of the family deserts her post. And once a rather flighty great-grand-aunt of ours *did*—she couldn't live at home, because she thought it was a dull part of the country, and she came up to London, and travelled about to amuse herself, and all *sorts* of things happened.'

'Did burglars break in, or was the house burnt down, or?'—— began Eric, but Celia interrupted him.

'You are laughing at me again,' she said reproachfully. 'No, it was worse than that. Her son turned out very badly, and was killed in a duel, and her daughter died, and they lost a lot of money, and in the end it came to our grandmother, you see, whose husband took the name Maryon. But the family has never been so well off since.'

'And in the face of all those warnings, your sister persists—no, what is it she wants to do or not to do?' said the young man, looking rather perplexed. 'The ghost can't bully her for not marrying a man she doesn't care for, surely? I thought better of ghosts than that!'

'No, it 's not that. It is that she wants to leave home and make a career for herself. And I admire her for it. That 's why we were so pleased

to come here: we want to find out about a lot of things.'

Eric looked really grave.

'Why is your sister not content to stay at home?' he inquired. 'Even if she were a man, there are men whose vocation it is not to have a profession, whose work and duties are there, all ready for them. Is it not much the same with Miss Maryon, considering your father's illness, and all there must be to look after?'

His hearer seemed surprised and almost startled. There are aspects of our daily life, ways of looking at our surroundings, with which we might long have been familiar—commonplace, matter-of-fact reflections, requiring no special genius of discrimination to call them forth—which, nevertheless when put into words by an outsider, strike us with extraordinary effect. Almost do they come upon us with the force of a revelation.

So was it just now with Celia Maryon. As she took in the full bearing of young Balderson's observations, she felt more and more struck by them. She looked up in his face with a strange cloud in her eyes, and Eric himself felt surprised. He imagined that he had somehow or other hurt or offended her.

'I beg your pardon,' he began, 'if—— Of course

I would not be so presumptuous as to suppose I could judge of the circumstances.'

Celia smiled. She would be true to her colours at any cost, and her colours meant her sister Winifred. The truth was that she was at a loss how to reply; she had never looked at things in this light before. She wanted to think it all over quietly by herself, but she was not going to allow this to any one else.

'No,' she said, 'of course you can't judge. You don't know Winifred, or what there is in her. My other sister, Louise, is the home one. She is not nearly so clever as Winifred, but she does pretty well. The bailiff isn't bad, though I'm afraid he's going to leave, and old Mr Peckerton, the lawyer, comes over if he 's wanted. Things go on in a groovy, old-fashioned way, but, oh, no! Winifred could never find her life-work in these directions.'

And again Celia smiled, a superior, almost contemptuous little smile this time. Her own words half-persuaded herself that she had been foolish to be so impressed by the young man's scarcely conscious remonstrance.

'Ah, of course I can't pretend to judge,' he repeated, and the modesty of his tone encouraged her to say a little more, to stifle her own

misgivings as much as to keep up her sister's dignity.

'Winifred is intended for a larger life altogether,' she said. 'And there are three of us at home. People are beginning to see the facts about women's lives differently. Why should we be condemned to trivial idleness? Look how some have thrown off the trammels! There is Miss Norreys, for instance. Could you imagine *her* spending her life in ordering legs of mutton and darning stockings?'

'No,' said Eric simply, 'I couldn't. And I don't think any woman's life need be, or should be, so dull and narrow. But still, Hertha Norreys is not a fair example. She has a gift, an undoubted gift. I think its greatness is scarcely yet recognised by herself or others; perhaps it never will be. But still she has not ignored it. She felt she had a talent and she was bound to cultivate it, and she has done so. In her case there was no choice.

Celia looked interested.

'I am glad you allow *that*, at any rate,' she said, and glancing at her, the young man almost fancied that she blushed a little. 'Of course *I* think cleverness like Winifred's a gift, but I can understand ordinary people not looking upon it as

if she had a great talent for music, or—or painting. It is easier when you have the one distinct power. Now there is Lady Campion. Your mother seems to think her so talented, but she has not concentrated her talents.'

'No,' said Eric, drily, 'she certainly has not.'

'And,' pursued Celia, 'she is married. She shouldn't have married if she wanted to *be* something.'

'But perhaps she didn't, or, at least, not what you call "something." She thinks herself very much "something" or "somebody," and her marriage has certainly not stood in her light.'

Celia hesitated.

'You don't like Lady Campion?' she said, abruptly.

'Oh yes, I do,' he replied, lightly. 'She's by no means a bad sort—of woman,' he went on, hastily. Celia was not the kind of girl to whom it seemed natural to talk slang. 'But she wouldn't have been half what she is if she hadn't married. The best of her, in my humble opinion, comes out as a wife. I like to see her with her husband. She recognises his superiority.'

'Oh dear,' thought Celia, 'what a man's way of putting it!'

'For he really is a first-rate fellow in his

own line. And she is not a genius, though she is —oh yes! she is—clever, though sometimes she makes herself just a little ridiculous.'

Celia did not speak. This was again a new light to her. She felt confused. She had pictured Lady Campion quite differently, somehow, and she felt sure Winifred had done the same, pitying her for having married and thus rashly clipped her wings.

'She—Lady Campion—admires Miss Norreys exceedingly,' said Celia, after a little silence. 'That should be a bond between you, for I can see you admire her exceedingly too.'

Eric looked somewhat surprised. The young girl had more perception than he had given her credit for.

'Yes,' he said, 'I do. I admire her very much indeed. As an artist, I place her more highly than might be generally thought reasonable, and, as a woman, yes, I admire her too, and respect her, except for'——

'What?' asked Celia, eagerly.

'I cannot tell you,' he answered. 'I was going to say that, as a woman, there is one direction in which I cannot admire her. But I cannot explain more fully, and perhaps I may have misjudged her. She is one in whom it would be

difficult to believe there existed any of the weaknesses that one finds in smaller characters.'

This was high praise. Celia's interest in Hertha grew with every word.

'I wish I knew her,' she said, earnestly. 'I should so like to meet her.'

Her words reached the ears of her companion on the other side. Mr Fancourt was beginning to feel as if he had had about enough of the neighbour—a talkative woman of forty or thereabouts, well up in the topics of the day, and of his own small section of the world in particular—on his left, whom hitherto he had deliberately chosen in preference to the pretty young creature on his right. And now, with the calm *insouciance* of an experienced diner-out, he turned to Celia.

'There must be more in her than I suspected,' he said to himself. 'She seems to have succeeded in making Balderson talk, and he can be pretty heavy in hand when it doesn't suit him to be lively.'

'You are speaking of Miss Norreys, are you not?' he asked. The name had caught his attention, and, when Celia bowed in response—'Yes, she is charming,' he went on. 'It is curious: I have found myself thinking of her two or three times during dinner. There is a certain

something which I cannot define, which reminds me of her in that girl on the other side of the table—nearer our host—yes,' as he followed Celia's eyes, 'the girl next but one to my wife. You know *her*, Mrs Fancourt, by sight—in pale green? No?' (He thought everybody knew his wife.) 'Ah, well, you know her now.'

'She is very pretty,' said Celia, simply.

'I cannot contradict you,' he said, with a well-pleased smile, which made Celia think that, after all, he must be rather a nice man—she liked husbands who thought their wives very pretty—and disposed her to question the truth of Winifred's sweeping assertion that conjugal affection was never to be found among 'smart' people. 'But,' continued Mr Fancourt, 'look at the girl I mentioned—the girl in black. Do you see the slight something — scarcely resemblance — about her, which recalls Miss Norreys?'

In her turn Celia now smiled with pleasure.

'She is my sister,' she replied. 'She will be delighted when she hears what you say. No, I don't think it would have struck me that there was any likeness. But I daresay there *is* some likeness in character. My sister is very self-reliant and—and—dauntless. And I should think there is something of that about Miss Norreys.'

Having found a topic of interest, the rest of the dinner passed pleasantly enough, and Mr Fancourt felt that doing his duty had not been the arduous task he had anticipated.

But it was her conversation with Eric Balderson which left its mark on Celia's mind.

'Oh, Celia,' said Winifred, when she managed to get her sister to herself for a moment in the drawing-room, 'I feel in a new world. Mr Sunningdale has been talking to me so delightfully, so *perfectly*. All my intuitions about the larger, wider life I should find in London are being realised. How narrow our small home-world seems in comparison! I told Mr Sunningdale something of what I am hoping to do, and I can see he sympathised in my longing to throw off the narrow trammels we have been brought up in. People here have much wider ideas!'

'You must have made friends very quickly,' said Celia.

In her tone there was not the complete and responsive sympathy which she was, as a rule, eagerly ready to give to her sister. She could not help it. A slight chill of doubt, of questioning of the perfect wisdom of Winifred's theories, had been, though unintentionally, cast over her. But

the elder Miss Maryon was too excited and enthusiastic to perceive it, and this Celia was glad to see. For, after all, the faintest idea of disagreement with Winifred's opinions or judgment was extraordinary and unnatural to her.

'Yes,' said Winifred, 'we did. But it does not need time to make friends when people are sympathetic. Mr Sunningdale has evidently thought out all the great questions of the day about women most thoroughly.'

She looked so bright and happy, so handsome and almost brilliant, that her younger sister gazed in loving admiration.

'Dear Winifred,' she said to herself. 'No wonder Mr Sunningdale or Mr Anybody admires her when she looks like that. I do feel sorry for dear old Lennox though.'

Poor Mr Sunningdale! Much had been credited to him which he would have been greatly astonished to hear of. He was, as has been said, a kind-hearted and eminently good-natured man; a man, too, who not only had a special line of distinction, but was above the smallness of being ashamed of talking about what he really understood. And Winifred Maryon was certainly intelligent enough to be a good listener, all of which explains the two having 'got on so well.' It was not, to do her

justice, till towards the end of dinner that Winifred ventured to allude to her aspirations. And the great man, gratified, as even great men can be, by the enthusiastic admiration—or veneration—in the girl's bright eyes, listened—how could he have done less?—to her confidences, with here and there a word or smile of kindly, half-amused encouragement. Though, truth to tell, the subject matter of these same confidences, if it did not go in at one ear to come out at the other, left but the vaguest and most fleeting impression behind it.

'Pretty girl—handsome rather than pretty—intelligent, too, but rather bitten by the advanced ideas of the day. She'll settle down when she's married,' was his commentary upon her to his hostess. 'An heiress, did you say? All the better, if she falls into good hands.'

And if Mrs Balderson had begun to build air-castles as to the possible consequences of her introduction—Winifred being, as she expressed it, 'just the sort of girl to prefer a man a good deal older than herself'—they speedily fell to the ground. Mr Sunningdale had a history: the not uncommon one of an adored girl-wife dead almost before he had realised she was his. And, despite the cynicism which many declared lay beneath his surface good-nature, there was something deeper

down still. He was not the man to dream of a second marriage.

Nor, as we know, were Miss Maryon's ideas likely to turn the least in such 'commonplace' directions.

The results of this first taste of London society were, however, to all appearance, eminently satisfactory. Winifred, as she bade her kind hostess good-night, was profuse in her thanks for the delightful evening she had spent. And if Celia's pretty eyes had a slight shadow over them, it could only have been that she was a little tired, thought the good woman.

'You took care of her at dinner, I hope, Eric?' she said to her son, who had been known to be afflicted with fits of absence on social occasions of the kind.

'Oh dear, yes. We got on capitally, like a house on fire,' he replied, cordially. 'I was so much obliged to you for giving me Celia to look after instead of her sister. I can't stand that other girl, and I think Lennox a lucky fellow to be out of it.'

'It is to be hoped he will come to see it in that light himself,' said Mrs Balderson. 'Not that I agree with you about Winifred. I like and admire her extremely, and I can understand her feeling

that poor Lennox is not enough for her. With her talents and strength of character she may aspire higher, not to speak of her—well—material advantages.'

Eric gave a little grunt.

Mrs Balderson sometimes found her son's grunts irritating.

'Celia, of course, is a sweet little thing,' she proceeded; 'but nothing in her.'

Mrs Balderson was *not* a worldly mother. Still she did not much want Eric to fall in love with Celia.

He grunted again.

'You are very uncivil, Eric,' she said, with a touch of asperity. 'Can't you say out what you mean? When you are like that, you make me feel you are influenced by nothing but commonplace, masculine contradiction.'

'Perhaps so,' he replied.

CHAPTER IV.

A FIRST STEP.

'WINIFRED,' said Mrs Balderson, the next morning but one, at the breakfast-table, 'here is something that will please you, I think,' and she held out to Miss Maryon a letter she had just opened.

It was from Lady Campion, asking them—the sisters and their hostess, or, if Mrs Balderson were otherwise engaged, the Maryon girls by themselves—to tea that same day, to meet Miss Norreys!

Winifred's eyes sparkled.

'Oh, how delightful!' she said. 'How kind of her to have remembered about it!'

But Mrs Balderson's face had clouded over with an expression of perplexity.

'It is unlucky,' she said. 'I had forgotten for the moment that we were engaged to go with my cousins, the Nestertons, to the Exhibition of

Embroidery in —— Street, and to tea with them afterwards. It *is* a pity. Mrs Nesterton took some trouble to arrange it, and it is the last day of the Exhibition.'

'Oh, but it really doesn't matter,' said Miss Maryon, and on Mrs Balderson's looking up with some surprise—for she had supposed that Winifred was exceedingly anxious to meet the woman she had so admired—'I mean,' she went on calmly, 'I don't at all mind missing the Exhibition, and I really don't know the Nestertons, you see, dear Mrs Balderson.'

Mrs Balderson did not feel very 'dear' at that moment.

'There are other things to be considered,' she said, stiffly. 'You *were* very eager to see the Exhibition, and I cannot be rude to my cousins, whether you know them or not, my dear Winifred. Besides, there is your sister as well as yourself. What do you say, Celia?'

It was new for Winifred to take in that Celia could have a voice of her own apart from hers; it was new for Celia to realise the fact. But she saw that Mrs Balderson was annoyed; she had infinitely greater power of putting herself in another's place than was possessed by her elder sister.

'I should be very sorry not to see the embroidery,' she replied, quickly, her face flushing a little, 'besides it would *never* do to be so rude to Mrs Nesterton.'

'I think Lady Campion deserves some consideration too,' said Winifred, unyieldingly. 'She is a very busy person, and she has evidently planned this on purpose to please m—us. And Miss Norreys must be a still busier person. I don't see that Mrs Nesterton *could* be offended if it were all explained to her.'

There was something in what she said as regarded Lady Campion and Miss Norreys. But Mrs Balderson, for once, was really vexed.

'Engagements are engagements,' she said, in a dry tone not usual with her.

Celia's face was still flushed. If only she could give Winifred a hint to be more deferential! She was so used to taking the lead at home, thought Celia, she could not help that authoritative manner.

Eric Balderson had watched the breakfast-table drama with slightly cynical interest. It gratified him to see Miss Maryon showing herself to disadvantage. He did not like her. But he loved his mother, and he liked Celia. He did not wish them to be worried. And he was of a kindlier

nature than he allowed to himself. So he came to the rescue.

'Can't you make a compromise?' he said. 'Supposing Miss Maryon goes to Lady Campion's, and you, mother, and Miss Celia Maryon keep to the Nesterton engagement? You might call for Miss Maryon on your way back, which would give Ce—Miss Celia Maryon,' with a slight twinkle of amusement in his eyes at his own involuntary freedom, 'a good chance of seeing Miss Norreys too. And'—with an obtrusively ponderous sigh —'if it would smooth down Cousin Barbara, I certainly haven't called there for an immense time. I might—there's no saying to what lengths the spirit of self-sacrifice won't carry me—I *might* meet you myself at the Exhibition, and go back to the Nestertons' with you.'

Mrs Balderson's face cleared. She hated being vexed with anybody; it was quite against her nature, if not her principles; she was already regretting her cold words to Winifred, and was pleased to find a consistent way out of the difficulty.

'That would be *very* nice,' she said, heartily. 'The Nestertons would be so pleased to have you, Eric, that I daresay they would scarcely regret even Winifred.'

It was hardly in human nature to have refrained from this little hit.

'Exactly,' said Winifred, coolly. 'They can't miss me when they don't know me. Very likely they will not even notice I am not there.'

Her coolness struck Celia as it had never done before. She would have given worlds to hint to her sister that something in the way of thanks for falling in with her wishes, to both her hostess and her son, would not have been unbecoming. But the suggestion would have been thrown away upon Miss Maryon, who was a striking example of the possibility of not seeing what she did not want to see. A word timidly hazarded by Celia on the subject, when they found themselves alone for a moment a short time afterwards, showed the younger sister that any such effort was better unmade.

The afternoon's programme was adhered to, Celia setting off with Mrs Balderson to the 'rendezvous' at the Exhibition, in apparently great content, for, if she were secretly disappointed at the small chance of her having more than a glimpse of Hertha Norreys, she was too unselfish and too sensible of what was due to her kind old friend to show it.

And at about a quarter to five, Winifred, in

happy independence, and blissfully unconscious of having in any way fallen short in consideration of others or deference to their wishes, found herself making her way into Lady Campion's drawing-room.

Her heart—for she was a girlish creature after all—beat considerably faster than usual: much faster, in all probability, than if she had been about to be introduced to some personage of exalted rank or social position. Her short-sightedness added somewhat also to her unusual embarrassment. For the room was fitfully, rather than dimly, lighted, after the fashion of drawing-rooms of the present day; and Winifred was used to old-fashioned lamps and white panelled wainscoting, reflecting the clear, generally diffused radiance. And there seemed to her to be a whole crowd of people sitting or standing about, as somewhat awkwardly, only just avoiding a catastrophe of some kind, she threaded her way through the too abundant pretty things on every side to the lady of the house.

She was not annoyed or ashamed of herself, however. She was too much in earnest about meeting Miss Norreys to think about herself. So there was real simplicity in her bearing, though, for once in her life, she looked decidedly timid.

And the look added wonderfully to her charm —in some eyes at least.

It is to be doubted if Hertha would ever have 'taken to' the girl as she did, but for the gentleness and appeal about her, this first time they met.

For Lady Campion had found time to whisper a word or two to her friend when Miss Maryon's name was announced.

'This is one of the little country girls—*the* one,' she said, 'who fell so desperately in love with you the other day, as I was telling you. Be nice to her, poor dear, won't you? Don't be stuck-up and stand-off.'

For both these dreadful things Miss Norreys *could* be, said rumour—and rumour sometimes speaks truly, on occasion. But not when she was sorry for any one, not when her large, pitiful heart was touched; then no woman could be sweeter and gentler and less alarming than Hertha.

And her first glance at Winifred made her sorry for her. Lady Campion's 'poor dear' had misled Miss Norreys. She had no idea that the girl was one of the prosperous of the earth, and Winifred was plainly dressed. She was neat, but that was about all. Her morning attire left more to be desired than her evening toilettes, which, though

a trifle heavy, perhaps, and on the outside of simplicity, were yet, as I said, of rich material, whereas her country ideas had not risen far as regarded the tailor-made tweeds and black or blue serges which were her usual winter garments.

And the room was imperfectly lighted. All that Miss Norreys saw was a girl of not more than average height and slightly square build, standing with perplexed eyes and an unmistakable air of strangeness, looking about for Lady Campion.

The face was a good one, good in form and pleasant in colouring; the eyes, despite their bewilderment, were clear and sweet; the whole was sweeter than Winifred's face was wont to be, thanks to the passing touch of wistfulness and perplexity.

In a moment Lady Campion was greeting her, exerting the charm of manner on which she not unjustly prided herself, to make the girl feel at her ease.

And soon Winifred found herself replying, with her usual readiness, to her hostess's inquiries as to what had become of Mrs Balderson and 'your sister.'

'They are coming later,' said Miss Maryon. 'They have gone first to the Lace Exhibition, in

—— Street, and then to the Nestertons. It was an old engagement, but Mrs Balderson will certainly call here on her way home.'

'It was very good of *you* to come,' said Lady Campion. 'It would have been too bad if you had all failed us.'

'I was only too delighted,' said Winifred. 'I am so glad to see you again, and'—with a not unbecoming hesitation and rising colour, as she glanced towards where she had, by this time, discovered Hertha—'you know I am *so* grateful to you for giving me the chance of meeting Miss Norreys. It was so very good of you to remember my wish.'

That Lady Campion was *still* remembering it she felt doubtful, as other guests came crowding round her, and she showed signs of moving away.

'I must say it right out, or she will forget to introduce me,' thought Winifred, with her customary determination.

But Lady Campion was not quite so flighty and unreliable as she got the credit of being. And she was really good-natured; she rather liked Winifred's downrightness. With a hand on her arm, she gently drew the girl forward towards the couch where sat Miss Norreys, a not uninterested spectator of the little drama.

'Lady Campion *is* a kind woman,' she said to herself. For there had been times when she was inclined to judge the lady in question too severely. With all her gifts, Hertha did not possess the capricious power so often found where one could least expect it, so even more frequently absent where one would have made sure of it—of correct, almost unfailing discernment of character. She was often mistaken, and being by nature much more enthusiastic than she allowed to appear, she had often been disappointed. And this had resulted in a certain hardening of her sympathies, which one felt to be perplexing. *Sometimes*, too, she had found herself obliged to reverse an unfavourable impression—a demand of honesty which brings with it some sting of mortification, interfering with the softening effect of what should be a gratifying discovery.

But hers was a character to mellow as she grew older. And with her a spark of pity was at all times, enough to ensure a glow of kindly interest.

This was what happened just now. She rose from her seat as Lady Campion and Winifred approached, and held out her hand with ready graciousness to the—as she imagined—somewhat shrinking girl, who was feeling herself, no doubt, strange and out of her element.

'It would have been kinder to have asked her by herself—or at least not among quite such a crowd,' she thought.

And to any one knowing Winifred, there would have been something almost amusing in the half-protecting tone with which Miss Norreys at once addressed her. But if love is blind, so is youthful enthusiasm, and Winifred was truly enthusiastic about the young singer. More than this, that any one could by any possibility look upon *her* as an object of protection or pity had never dawned upon the girl, whose self-confidence and matter-of-fact preoccupation with her own ideas often dulled her perceptions. If she noticed any special warmth in Miss Norreys' greeting, she put it down, though perhaps scarcely in so many words, to the favourable impression she herself made on her new acquaintance.

'We took to each other from the first moment,' she said to Celia afterwards in describing the meeting.

'Will you come and sit down by me for a little—there is plenty of room on the sofa?' said Hertha, and Winifred delightedly obeyed. 'Lady Campion tells me,' she went on, 'that this is, practically, almost your first visit to London. I think I envy you.'

'Do you?' said Winifred, not quite sure of her meaning. 'I—I really don't know. We live quite, *quite* in the country, you see. It is, of course, very interesting to see London for the first time when one is old enough to take it in better, but'——

'That is what I meant,' interrupted Miss Norreys, pleased at being understood. 'I did not mean—at least I was not just then thinking of the other side—the delights of true country life, of "quite, *quite* in the country" life,' with a little smile.

'Oh!' said Winifred with a sigh. 'If you knew what it was—all the year round—so monotonous, so *narrow*. I feel, since coming here, as if all my time hitherto had been wasted.'

'Poor child!' thought Miss Norreys, 'a country parson's daughter, I think Helena Campion said and, *of course*, poor. I can fancy the life must be rather terrible—grinding away to make both ends meet. Probably a lot of younger brothers and sisters. And she is evidently a clever girl—a girl of ideas.'

'It is never too late to mend,' she said, cheerfully. 'You will go home enriched by a store of new thoughts and knowledge. I doubt if you would have benefited in the same way had you

seen more of this wonderful—yes, it is wonderful —modern London life when you were younger. Though you are very young still.'

'No,' said Winifred, quaintly, with a little shake of her head, 'I am not very young. And—I have come up to London with an object. I have waited so long, and I have tried to be patient! But now, at last, I do trust I am to find an opening. I *must* get something to do—a career. It was surely a good omen that I should have seen you, Miss Norreys, the very first day, for I feel you will sympathise with me—you who have risen above the stupid old-fashioned trammels so grandly. Of course I know there can be no comparison—you are a genius, *I* have only very ordinary powers very imperfectly trained. But I have determination and courage. I feel it is in me to do *something*—not to be condemned to the terribly narrow life, which is all I have to look to unless I succeed.'

She spoke so rapidly, and yet so earnestly, that Hertha could not attempt to stop her. Yet it was hardly the place or time for a personal discussion of the kind. Miss Norreys felt touched, and yet a trifle annoyed. It was scarcely fair of Lady Campion, who must have known all about this girl, to have encouraged her to thus appeal to her,

a stranger, for advice and assistance. For, in plain English, these, no doubt, were what she was in want of.

'And what can I do for her?' thought Hertha. 'My world is the musical world. She does not speak of any special gifts in that direction. Yet, poor girl, evidently she is in the right about doing *something*. I do sympathise with that. If I had had no music in me, no voice, or no distinct talent, still I could have done *something*, rather than drag on, striving to make both ends meet, with no energy left for better things, as some poor women do.'

These reflections passed through her mind, softening her momentary irritation. But for a few minutes she sat silent.

Winifred watched her intently.

'You will advise me?' she said at last, in a half-whisper. 'You do sympathise with me?'

Miss Norreys roused herself.

'My dear Miss Maryon,' she said, 'of course I sympathise with you; I understand the position only too well, and I feel for you very much. But what can I do? You have no marked musical talent, I suppose; the only advice of mine really worth anything, for it is backed by my own experience, would refer to a musical career.'

Winifred shook her head.

'No,' she said. 'I am not musical. I wish I were—at least—no, I am not sure that that is the gift I covet most. Yet, do not misunderstand me,' she added hastily; 'I *love* music. When listening to some music, when listening to your voice, I feel as if my soul were awakening, as if it had found itself.'

She was in earnest—her eyes glowed, her really fine features seemed full of emotion; yet, was it her extreme, though unconscious, egotism that slightly repelled Miss Norreys?

'I wish she were not so high-flown,' she thought. 'Still, she is not affected: she does not mean to be so, at any rate. And she is candid. But I do love simplicity. I don't think she would ever do to be a governess, but probably she has no thought of so commonplace a career.'

'Then what—in what direction do you mean to turn?' she asked aloud. 'You have thought too much about it not to have some definite ideas?'

'I have several,' Winifred replied eagerly. 'I ask nothing better than to tell you all. And what I thought you would advise me about was as to living in London: I must arrange that almost first of anything. Don't you think I am quite old enough to live alone?'

'Certainly not,' Miss Norreys replied, with a smile. 'Besides, you would find it very expensive if you care about any sort of comfort.'

'I don't,' said Winifred, confidently. 'But—well, yes, I suppose I must consider it to some extent, for the sake of my people, you see—and—if you really think I can't live alone'——

But at that moment Hertha saw approaching her a great friend of hers—a man to whom she was bound by long-standing ties of affection and gratitude, but whom, owing to his and her own busy lives, she met less frequently than she would have wished. She turned to Winifred—

'I must speak to Mr—to the man who had just come in,' she said, half-rising from her seat. 'Some other time, perhaps, Miss Maryon'——

'How tiresome!' said Winifred. 'Just when we were getting into a really nice talk. Cannot you just say a word or two to him, and come back again, Miss Norreys?'

But Hertha was on her feet by this time.

'We must arrange some other day. I will write to you,' she said, hurriedly, eager not to miss the pleasant chance before her.

And Winifred remained alone on the sofa. She was satisfied on the whole; she had made a

beginning. Miss Norreys was appreciative, and she felt sure of her ground with her.

'If such a thing could be as my living with *her!*' thought Winifred. 'That would be ideal. Whatever work I take up, I could manage to fit it in to such an arrangement. And if I decide on writing as my principal occupation, of course I shall be very independent—pen and ink can do their work anywhere.'

She watched Miss Norreys and the tall stranger —a man of forty or thereabouts—slightly gray, and with a somewhat peculiar stoop.

'How good she is!' thought Winifred; 'I can see he is boring her. I wonder what they are talking about.'

Better, perhaps, for her that she could not hear.

'I did not interrupt you, I hope,' the newcomer was saying. 'You seemed rather engrossed with that little person on the sofa. But I came here on purpose to see you.'

'I hoped, too, I should see *you*,' she replied. 'No, the girl over there is a stranger to me, Helena Campion introduced us—rather rashly, for the poor thing imagines I can help her, and I really can't. She has to make her way in the world, and wants advice. I am sorry for her, but —I am really *so* busy.'

'My dear, you must not take any more burdens upon you. You really must *not*,' said her old friend, decidedly. 'What does the girl want? She is a lady, I suppose—well educated? I might introduce her to the "Reasonable Help Society." They are increasing their staff, and she might get a small salary.'

Miss Norreys looked and felt grateful.

'It would be most good of you,' she said. 'I *should* be glad to help her, or, indeed, any one so placed, but the little I can do is in my own line, and I am overwhelmed with applications for assistance and advice in that direction.'

Mr Montague nodded sympathisingly.

'No one would believe it,' continued Hertha, with a half-rueful smile, 'I could easily spend all my time in answering letters, trying songs, listening to would-be vocalists, and where would my own work be then? Yet the service which each asks—the individual service—seems so small. But how they mount up!'

'It is the same in every department,' her friend replied. 'Once your name gets before the world, people seem to think you are common property, and have no right to your own time and strength. Literary people are even more bothered than you, if that is any comfort to you. For it is not every

one that can deceive him or herself into imagining they possess musical gifts, whereas *everybody* nowadays has a try at authorship.'

And if Hertha's smile had been rueful, Mr Montague's was grim.

'This girl is *not* musical, Heaven be praised!' Miss Norreys replied.

'I rejoice to hear it—for your sake,' he answered, fervently. 'Tell me her name,' and he drew out a tiny note-book.

'Maryon—Miss Maryon—that is all I know,' said Hertha.

'Miss Marion,' he wrote, 'Marion *what?*'

'Oh, it is her surname—M-a-r-y, not "i,"' she corrected. 'Lady Campion mentioned it in her note. A Miss Maryon who was dying to meet me, or some nonsense.'

'It is too bad,' Mr Montague repeated. 'But I will see what I can do, and she must call at the office to be examined as to her capabilities. "Maryon," an uncommon name. There are some rich people—a very old family—Maryons down in Brakeshire.'

'Ah, she can't belong to them, poor girl,' said Hertha.

And then, feeling she had done her duty, she and Mr Montague turned to other things.

CHAPTER V.

MISAPPREHENSION AND MISGIVING.

LADY CAMPION'S drawing-room continued to fill—to fill and to empty—for as some went out, others came in. And everywhere and at all moments, Hertha Norreys was surrounded and eagerly greeted.

'It is wonderful how much she is made of,' thought Winifred from her corner. 'Not, of course, that she does not deserve it, but I have so often been told that the best people are not the most appreciated by the common herd.'

The expression would scarcely have been deemed appropriate. If there was one thing Lady Campion prided herself on, it was that her 'habitués' formed a very *un*common herd indeed. *Her* lions and lionesses must be well dressed and charming—perfectly well-bred and unexceptionable. And as Winifred heard the names—now

and then mentioned to her in passing by her good-natured hostess, or by some of the friends she introduced the girl to, with the excuse that she was 'a perfect stranger, never been in London before'—of men and women she had hitherto reverenced from afar, she began to allow to herself that if she had known it was to be so much of a party, she would have dressed better. 'Though I never imagined people like "so-and so" cared about dressing at all,' she added to herself.

The rooms were thinning—indeed they had never been what to more experienced eyes would have seemed very full, when Mrs Balderson—followed by Celia, Eric bringing up the rear—came in.

'What a lovely girl!' said a voice beside Winifred; and turning with quick pleasure, she saw that the speaker was Miss Norreys's Mr Montague. And close beside him, though Winifred had not been aware of her proximity, stood Hertha herself.

'Yes, indeed,' she replied, warmly. 'She is like a beautiful lily.'

Celia was better—at least more becomingly—dressed than her sister, and her taller, more graceful figure showed whatever she wore to advantage.

Mrs Balderson had reviewed her before they

went out, and Winifred had taken her usual interest in Celia's appearance, attiring herself, later in the afternoon, with her customary indifference to everything but neatness.

A flush of gratification rose to her face at the words she overheard, and moving forward so as to approach Hertha a little more nearly, she said in a low voice:

'I am so glad you admire her: she is my sister, my younger sister.'

Miss Norreys turned. For a moment she half doubted if she herself was addressed. In the interest of meetings and talk she had almost forgotten Winifred's existence. But now the face, looking up at her so brightly and eagerly, attracted her much more than before.

'Your sister, Miss Maryon!' she said, with a sunny smile on her face; 'well, I need not repeat what I said, as you heard it. But it is certainly true.'

And she felt drawn to the girl as she had not hitherto done.

'May I, oh, may I introduce her to you?' Winifred went on, and encouraged by Miss Norreys'

'By all means, if you like.'

'Celia, Celia!' she said anxiously—for Celia at

that moment was being monopolised by some friends of Mrs Balderson's—'Celia,' when the girl at last heard her, 'do come here. I want to introduce you to Miss Norreys.'

Celia was feeling profoundly shy, and her shyness, as usual, veiled itself by excessive stiffness. The impression she made upon Hertha was not of the most favourable.

'She is very pretty, *very* pretty,' thought Miss Norreys, 'but evidently nothing more, and very spoilt. This poor dear elder sister denies herself, no doubt, to do all she can for her. Their very dress shows it. I must not be prejudiced. I daresay this girl is a noble character. I must be kind to her.'

And it was with increased cordiality she bade Winifred good-bye, having already got her address and promised to write to her.

'Is she not *too* delightful?' said Winifred, ecstatically, to her sister.

'She has evidently taken a great fancy to *you*,' replied Celia, evasively. 'And that is *the* thing.'

In her heart she felt a touch of disappointment.

'Why did Miss Norreys look at me with a kind of disapproval?' she asked herself. 'She surely can't be stuck-up or capricious—she has such a *good* face.'

'Do you think she will really be able to help us—you?' she went on.

'I am sure of it. I had not time to tell her about *you*, Celia, but you see once *I* get an independent footing it will be all right for you. I managed to tell her a good deal. I am certain she sympathises with the position, the longing for emancipation—oh, yes, I feel that I have got my foot on the first rung of the ladder,' she concluded, enthusiastically.

Some days passed, nevertheless, without any more of the ladder appearing through the haze. Miss Norreys made no sign. The days passed pleasantly, however, so pleasantly that Winifred sometimes felt half guilty for enjoying them and making no further effort towards the realisation of those schemes for the future which had been the underlying '*but*' of her own and, indeed, of Celia's visit to London. It was difficult to do anything, or to know what to do. Mrs Balderson, in her innocence of these girls having any thoughts or aspirations other than those she remembered in her own girlhood, exhausted herself in the endeavour to make them enjoy themselves, to 'have a good time,' and she succeeded. They had never had a better—never, indeed, half so good!

They were scarcely free, however, to do anything but what was planned for them. Morning, noon, and night for the first two weeks of their stay, engagements of all kinds were the order of the day. Shoppings, exhibitions, concerts, plays, afternoon teas, occasional dinner-parties at home, or, more rarely, an invitation for one girl to accompany her host and hostess to dine elsewhere, one or two very mild winter dances even—what, in the old and less sophisticated days, would have been called 'carpet-dances'—all these things followed each other in such quick rotation as to make life in London, even in November, seem to these country girls a sort of kaleidoscope.

'I suppose we are learning a good deal, even unconsciously. I suppose it is all a sort of experience it is well to go through,' said Winifred, dubiously. 'But it is not what I expected. I see what it is, Celia; I shall have to come up again on my own account, really, to go into things and arrange something. Father and mother cannot object now that I have got friends here, and some one to advise me.'

'Do you mean Miss Norreys?' said Celia.

'Yes—and—I should not be very surprised if Lady Campion asked me to stay with her, do you

know? She was quite interested the other day when I said a little to her—just a very little—of my wish to *do something*. She seemed quite struck by it, and said she would like to talk more about it.'

'Are you sure she understood what you mean? She may have thought you would like to help in her Decoration Guilds, or Shakespeare Recitals, or some of those things she has so many of,' said Celia. 'There are heaps of those half-play, half-work things for girls who don't need to work really, you know.'

Celia had guessed rightly. Lady Campion, though she had inadvertently conveyed to Miss Norreys a wrong impression of Miss Maryon's position, had no thought of suggesting to the girl any work of the kind Winifred had set before herself.

Her face clouded over a little at Celia's words.

'But I don't want to be thought that sort of girl,' she said. 'I don't want to be thought rich, and I am *not* rich. I am dependent on papa. Besides, if I were—if I had been a son, I should not have been debarred from a profession because I was the heir to "White Turrets" and Busheyreeds, and all the property. Why should a woman be treated differently in such a case?

Why should *her* wings be clipped and she be restricted to a narrow, monotonous life any more than a man?'

Celia scented danger. She saw that Winifred was lashing herself up to one of her 'revolts,' as she called them herself sometimes, and she knew that any, even the slightest suspicion of less full sympathy than she had hitherto been able to give would be sharply resented. Yet she was too honest to evade the possible discordance, painful though the smallest disagreement with her sister would be to her. For a moment or two she sat silent. Then she said boldly:

'I am not sure of that ground, Winifred. I have been seeing things a little differently lately. If you had been a son—placed as you are—I doubt if it would have been thought right for you to have a profession—outside work, so to say—when there is so much to do at home.'

'What nonsense!' said Winifred. 'Do you mean to say that because a man had property to look after he would be debarred from cultivating his special gifts? Why, some, perhaps not many, but some of our greatest men—artists as well as statesmen and writers—have been rich men, men of property. No, it is only *women* who are always hedged in with one excuse or another.'

'But you haven't any special gifts,' said Celia, 'at least you always say so. Your wish is to be of use, and—to be independent;' and in her heart she felt the latter should have been placed first. 'You can't be a statesman, and I don't think even you would regret that for a woman. But you can be of any amount of *use* at home. And you could study all sorts of things about the management of property that would help you to be still more so.'

She felt half-frightened at her own daring, and her fears were not without foundation. Winifred stared at her, not quite sure if she were going to let herself get angry or not.

'What has come over you, Celia?' she said at last. 'You are worse than Louise. Who has been talking to you and putting all these ideas into your head? Do you apply them to yourself too? What about your longing to paint—to have really good instruction?'

'I still long for it,' said Celia, 'and I *think* I still believe it would be right for me to have it. I think I should test myself so as to find out if I have a gift, a decided gift. For if so, I should cultivate it. In my case no definite responsibilities are before me in life, as is the case with you, yet'——

'Rubbish!' said Winifred, crossly. 'There are just as many before you and Louise as before me. I shall never marry, and you and she will be just as much concerned in the management of things some day as I.'

'Perhaps,' said Celia, 'but not just yet, in any case. And yet—as I was going to say—I don't quite see at present what is right for me to do. If there are many difficulties in the way, if it would cause unhappiness at home, perhaps it would be my duty to wait—to wait even for the testing myself,' and she sighed. 'I don't want to leave home for the sake of leaving home, but I do want to know if I am deceiving myself in thinking I *have* a gift. And father and mother are so kind and reasonable. I don't think I need give up the idea.'

'You are very selfish, dreadfully selfish, though perhaps you don't know it,' said Winifred. 'You would make out that what *you* want is right just because you want it. But I, many years older than you, who have thought over these questions for the last ten years'——

'You are not many years older than I, and ten years ago you were *ever* so much younger than I am now. You were a child,' interrupted Celia.

——'who have thought about these questions ever since I could think at all,' Winifred resumed calmly—for, to do her justice, she was by no means bad-tempered, and seldom lost her self-control—'am to give up my deepest and most cherished hopes, because—no, I really can't say why! Because I want to leave the beaten track, I suppose.'

'You won't see things any other way,' said Celia, 'so it's no use talking about it. Perhaps it may be best for you to try the experiment, though in a different way from me. Anyway, don't let us quarrel about it, whatever we do, dearest Winifred. Of course your coming to live in London would make it all infinitely nicer for me, if,' and a troubled expression crossed her face, 'if it is really right for us both to leave home.'

'There is Louise at home. She asks nothing better than to jogtrot along for ever in the same monotonous way. She is an anachronism. She would have been perfectly happy a hundred years ago, or even longer ago than that, when it never occurred to any one that a woman *could* want anything more exciting than her spinning-wheel and her tapestry-frame.'

'Or her napery press and pot-pourri jars,' added Celia, with a smile. 'Well, after all, there

is to me a wonderful charm about those days; there must have been a great deal of tenderness and delicacy about a lady's life, which get rubbed off nowadays. And there is a good deal of sense in what Louise says. Monotony is not the worst evil. Why, lots of married women have monotonous lives.'

'If they have, it has been of their own choice,' said Winifred. 'What I complain of is the being condemned to narrowness and dullness if you don't marry. Short of marriage, a girl is allowed no other possibility of outlet.'

'But,' protested Celia, 'though that may be the case for some, or many even, when there *are* duties that you are born into, surely it is different? And even beyond that—is it not possible that what you call dull, narrow lives, filled with stupid little odds and ends of usefulness, that don't seem usefulness at all, may be the very discipline needed by some—may be *meant* for them?'

'Oh,' said Winifred impatiently, 'if you are going off to the very highest grounds of all, I suppose the being an old maid in an attic may be the best discipline for old maids in attics, but it is the *system* of narrowing down women's lives that is wrong. And if in their girlhood some of the old maids had rebelled, and insisted on taking their

stand as men do, things would have been better by now. There must be individual resistance. Think what Hertha Norreys's life would have been if she had simply accepted things!'

'Ah, but it was different for her. She had a great talent, and she needed to work,' said Celia. 'In a case like hers there could be no doubt. I really don't pity girls who *need* to work so much as others in some ways. Not the rich—they can always, if they wish, find ways of being useful: the very conditions of their lives bring opportunities. But girls whose lives are very uninteresting, and yet not poor exactly, I pity *them*—girls who even can scarcely afford to get books to read.'

'They should throw nonsensical dignity to the winds, and work,' said Winifred.

'Yes, I think so too,' said Celia.

She had been thinking a great deal lately—more really and thoroughly and dispassionately than ever before in her life. She was coming to realise that, even to questions of apparently purely personal interest, there may be—there is—more than one side. And the starting-point of all these meditations had been the half-unconscious remarks of Eric Balderson the day he sat beside her at dinner and endeavoured to make amends for Mr Fancourt's neglect.

The mention of Miss Norreys made Winifred determine to remain inactive no longer.

'I must write to her,' she decided. 'I must beg her to let me see her once before I leave. We shall certainly not stay more than a week longer'—their original three weeks had already expired—'and I must have some plan for the future before I go home, otherwise I shall really feel that the golden opportunity of this visit has been wasted. I must arrange something about where to stay when I come up again, to go into things more definitely. There is no chance now of Lady Campion's asking me, unluckily.'

For Sir Hugh Campion had had a return of bronchitis, and was ordered abroad for the winter, his wife, of course, accompanying him. This had happened so suddenly that Lady Campion and Hertha had not met since the afternoon of Winifred's introduction to the latter. No opportunity, therefore, had arisen of rectifying the mistaken impression Lady Campion had unintentionally conveyed to her friend of Miss Maryon's position and circumstances.

And all these days the remembrance of the eager, bright-eyed girl, who had so abruptly appealed to her for advice and assistance, had clung to Hertha with almost annoying pertinacity.

Winifred—though she did not think of her by that name, never having heard it—would be expecting to hear from her, she felt sure. Yet what could she say? She herself had heard nothing more from Mr Montague; there was no use in making appointments, or inviting the girl to come to see her, when she had absolutely nothing to tell her. And an appointment, or a 'told-off' afternoon, in Hertha's busy life, meant a great deal more than some people would find it easy to believe.

But, as often happens, the very first post after Winifred had despatched her own note to Miss Norreys, brought a letter to herself from Hertha —a letter that filled her with excitement and sanguine anticipations. It ran:

'Dear Miss Maryon—I have not forgotten your wish and my promise that we should meet again. But I have waited a few days in hopes of having something to tell you of which might make it more worth your while to come to see me. And to my great pleasure these hopes are to some extent fulfilled. By a lucky chance, just after you had spoken to me, I came across the very person the most able to help in such a case. Through his kindness, I have a proposal to make to you. I will tell you all particulars if you will call here to-morrow, Friday, at half-past four in the afternoon, when I shall be disengaged for a short

time. The whole thing seems really a piece of good luck, for, as I told you, I have neither experience of, nor influence in, any line of life but my own.—Yours very truly, 'HERTHA BENEDICT NORREYS.'

Winifred's eyes gleamed. But she kept her delight to herself, merely dashing off a word of rapturous gratitude to her new friend, and eager acceptance of her invitation. She said nothing to either her sister or Mrs Balderson beyond announcing the fact that 'to-morrow afternoon' she had an engagement which would prevent her going out with them.

Mrs Balderson was annoyed. She felt, with justice, that, having given herself so much trouble for her young guests, and to a great extent disorganised her usual arrangements in their behalf, she should at least have been consulted as to any independent engagements they wished to make.

'I do not understand Winifred,' she said to her son. 'Her manners, at least her ways, are certainly rather like those of an advanced or "emancipated" young woman of the day. Yet surely it is impossible that she can have got hold of any of those ideas in that quiet, sheltered, almost old-fashioned country life of theirs. And her mother is such a perfect model of good breeding.'

Eric shrugged his shoulders.

'*Quien sabe*,' he said. 'Ideas are in the air, I suppose. You never can tell where they will crop up. Why, even Celia has her theories—only she is very different from her sister, both in character and temperament. But I wouldn't worry about Winifred, my dear mother. You have been more than good to them both, and they know it—at any rate, Celia does—and they will be leaving very soon.'

'Yes, I shall be sorry for Celia to go. She is very sweet. But I could not take the responsibility of Winifred for long. As I said, I do not understand her. Don't be afraid, however, of my making any fuss. I would not on any account spoil the last few days of their visit by beginning to find fault.'

So Winifred set off, uninterfered with, to call on Miss Norreys, while Celia accompanied Mrs Balderson to the large annual meeting of a charitable society, in which the kind-hearted and liberal woman was much interested.

Celia was interested too. She had the happy power of throwing herself very thoroughly into the surroundings of the moment, and her mind in the last two or three weeks had begun to open in several new directions.

But all through the speeches and reports which followed each other in rapid succession, and which she would have liked to listen to with an unpreoccupied mind, there kept rising the half-uneasy thought: 'I wonder where Winifred has gone, and why she did not tell me all about it. Can it be on account of what I said the other day? I hope she won't do anything rash.'

For some things, Celia felt she would not be sorry to be home again—'with mother and Louise'—yet the sense of disappointment that she had made no way towards the realisation of her own ardent wish was keen to her. And Winifred did not seem to sympathise in this as she used to do.

'She called me selfish,' thought Celia, 'because I said that perhaps—perhaps it might be different for her and me. I wonder why we don't seem quite as much at one as when we were at home.'

CHAPTER VI.

AN OPENING.

MISS NORREYS had a tiny home of her own, at some considerable distance from the Balderson mansion, which was about as far west as it could be to be yet in a thoroughly good position. The house in question was tiny in some ways, but it scarcely gave one that impression, for it contained one very large room, originally, in all probability, intended for a studio, which Hertha had converted into a music-room, a small so-called drawing-room or boudoir leading into it, being her own private sanctum.

She lived alone now, save for an old servant, who had never left her—who had solved the problem of out-staying the proverbial twenty-one years without degenerating from the 'faithful friend' of the middle seven into the 'unendurable tyrant' of the last term. But Miss Norreys

had not been long alone. Only three short years ago, the mother, the adored mother, whose later life had been rendered peaceful and happy by the daughter's brave energy, the young brother, whose education and start in the world was all his sister's doing, had both been with her. Now the former was at rest in the unknown country, which yet, as life goes on, and we think of the sweet souls who have preceded us there, loses the dread sense of strangeness—seems almost to grow more familiar than this side of the river. And the other, Hertha's dearly-loved Jasper, was away in India, the right place for him as a poor man, and where he was already rewarding her for her devotion by his unexceptionable and promising life.

'If only it were not so far away,' she would say to herself sometimes, as many another woman in England says to herself every day. And then she would let her thoughts revert to the time when they were all three together, to the struggles which, viewed in the tender light of the past, seemed to have been nothing but happiness, to the delight, doubled by being shared, with which she had realised the fact of her first success.

'How proud we were when we took this house!' she said to herself. 'How hot Jasper made himself with hanging up all the curtains and

things in the studio! How could I ever have murmured at *anything* then!'

It was not often she allowed herself to indulge in these reminiscences. She was full of real sentiment, but she had a wholesome dread of anything approaching sentimentalism, of which, living alone as she did, she knew she must beware. Only sometimes, in the enforced pauses of her busy life, she would allow herself the 'treat,' as she called it, of going back to the past for a while, though there were other pages of her girl-life which, for the sake of her own peace of mind, she kept resolutely under lock and key.

She was sitting idle for once—her thoughts busied with the bright and peaceful memories of the two so dear to her—on the day that she was expecting Miss Maryon to call. It was not often that she could afford to spare an afternoon, and her doing so now was out of the purest and most disinterested kindness to the girl who had appealed to her so unexpectedly. And when Hertha made up her mind to a thing she did it thoroughly.

'To judge by her talk at Helena Campion's, that day,' she said to herself, 'she will not be content with half an hour or so. I had better arrange to be free for the rest of the afternoon. Besides, of course, there really will be a good

deal to discuss, for I am sure she is quite extraordinarily inexperienced, despite her funny little assumptions of wisdom.'

Almost on the stroke of the appointed hour, the bell rang.

'Come,' thought Miss Norreys, as she heard Winifred's clear, decided tones, inquiring for herself, 'she is punctual, and so much the better. So many of these would-be independent and self-reliant young women prejudice others almost from the first by their airy disregard of every one else's convenience.'

No—to a certain extent Winifred was really practical and reliable. She was grateful, too, to Hertha, and so anxious to stand well with her that the last twenty minutes had been spent in walking up and down the street till within a minute or so of the appointed hour.

She came in, looking eager and yet a little shy. Her bright, short-sighted eyes glanced with evident interest round the pretty little room, opening at one end, 'à deux battants,' into the large studio, which was but dimly lighted, then returned to rest with unmistakable admiration upon her young hostess.

'Oh, how delightful, how charming it all is!' she exclaimed, impulsively. 'Oh, Miss Norreys,

thank you so much, so very much, for letting me come to see you.'

'I am pleased to see you. I shall be very glad if I can be of any use to you,' Hertha replied. It was not in her essentially generous nature to repress the girl, whose enthusiasm was plainly sincere. 'Will you take your cloak off? My rooms are not cold. We shall have tea directly. In the meantime, before we begin to talk, would you like to see my little domain? I am very proud of my music-room.'

She led the way into the larger room, turning up the light as she entered it. It was very tastefully arranged—some few good pictures, one or two pretty cabinets, and a respectable number of well-bound books filling glass-doored cases at one end, all relics of more prosperous times, giving a certain dignity to the whole. There were two pianos, and a harp stood in one corner.

Winifred stood entranced.

'It is quite charming,' she said; 'just the sort of nest one would long to have.'

Hertha was amused at the expression. She considered her big room much more than a 'nest.'

'My young friend does not seem to realise how rare such quarters are in London,' she thought.

'I suppose she is used to a bare, but perhaps not very small, country vicarage.'

'Yes, I am very lucky indeed,' she replied. 'A room like this is a great "find" in London.'

'Is it really?' said Winifred, peering up at the ceiling. 'Oh dear, it is *just* what I should like.'

Miss Norreys repressed the desire to tell her that, as things were with her, she might as well wish for Aladdin's palace at once.

'She will learn by experience,' she said to herself.

'And the whole thing—your life, yourself,' Winifred went on—'it is like the realisation of a dream to me. Your splendid independence and freedom. Just think of the contrast between you and an ordinary girl living at home in slavery, or at least in a sort of prolonged childhood, with no personal standing, no liberty to follow her own intuitions.'

A shadow crossed Hertha's beautiful forehead.

'I have not always lived alone like this,' she said. 'Not, indeed, for very long. This house is endeared to me by having spent several years in it with my two'—her voice faltered a little—'my mother and my brother. I have never wished for

what you call "independence." I was too happy while I had one or two who cared to direct me. I loved being treated like a child.'

'You must have been *most* fortunately placed,' said Winifred.

'I was,' replied Hertha. 'My parents were just *perfect.* It was circumstances and'—she hesitated, for she was touching on uncertain ground—'a good deal, perhaps, the fact of my having a voice, a talent, which led me to leave the beaten path. No desire to throw off the dear home ties. I have often wondered what I should have done with my voice had I not *needed* to utilise it; how far it would have been right to give up time to cultivating it; how far, so to say, the possession of a voice means "a vocation." That sounds like a poor attempt at a pun,' she ended off with a smile.

But Winifred did not notice her little piece of fun.

'You would have done just what you have done,' she burst out. 'You would never have been content in the beaten track—in the narrow, hedged-in life, which is what most women lead.'

'I'm afraid I should have been very content,' said Hertha. 'I am not at all sure that I am not by nature very lazy. The energy of many—I

think I might say of most women now-a-days—appals me. I don't agree with you that the "narrow, hedged-in lives" are the lot of the "most," not in London, anyhow.'

'Well, no, perhaps not in London,' Winifred agreed. 'That is why I want to come here.'

'And, oh dear!' said Miss Norreys with again a little smile that seemed more of the nature of a sigh, 'you don't know how I long sometimes for that sort of life. Fancy, with parents and sisters and an old-fashioned home in the country—the sort of place that has not changed much for hundreds of years, where you can distil your own lavender-water and make great jars full of pot-pourri, where there is a lady's walk and a ghost, and where you know every saint's face in the windows at church—oh, what a lovely life it might be! If my lot had fallen in such lines, I hope I should have had the energy to cultivate my voice and to use it to give pleasure to others, to poor folk above all; but oh, how joyfully I should have hurried home from my enforced visits to London! I used to dream of such a life,' she added. 'Now it is different. I am alone. No place could be much "home" to me.'

A curious expression flickered over Winifred's face.

'How—how strange!' she said, vaguely. 'I did not think you were like that, Miss Norreys. I suppose it is poetry,' she went on. 'I suppose you are poetical in a way I don't understand. Have you ever seen the sort of place you describe? If you had such a home, it would pretty certainly not have the charm you imagine.'

'Oh yes, it would,' said Hertha. 'It *would* have had, I mean. I am not high-flown. There must be such a beautiful content in feeling there you are, in a centre where God has put you—where you can be of use to many, "hedged-in" to clear and distinct duties and responsibilities. I suppose I needed the other side or it would not have come to me. I might have been lazy.'

She took a certain satisfaction in repeating this, for, though she really meant all she said, there was something about Winifred's half dogmatic, half matter-of-fact insistance on her own views and opinions that provoked Hertha to a kind of contradiction—almost to wish to shock her!

Just then the entrance of tea caused a momentary diversion. There was nothing of the Bohemian about Hertha. The little table was set out with scrupulous though simple care. There was a touch of genuine 'old-fashionedness,' very distinct from the modern affectations and

imitations of picturesque quaintness, about her, which added to her charm by its unexpectedness. But Winifred Maryon, for reasons which will explain themselves, was not specially struck by it. She accepted all she saw, in her inexperience, as a matter of course.

'Have I ever seen such a house as I have been talking about?' Miss Norreys went on, as she poured out the tea into two *really* old willow-pattern cups, adding sugar and cream from a small silver bowl and jug, worn thin with many years of daily use. 'No, not *exactly*. There was a place which we once had reason to think would have been ours, which could have been made perfectly beautiful—but it never came into our hands, and now it is pulled down and the land built over. As things are, I do not regret it. Will you have another cup of tea, Miss Maryon? Yes; that's right. And now we must get to business, and talk about you, not me.'

But Winifred's enthusiasm for her new friend was so great that even the absorbing interest of her own affairs paled before it.

'I love so to hear about yourself and what you think and feel,' she said. 'I cannot believe we really differ about anything. You have beautified your life so, unconsciously, that you can scarcely

realise the dullness and monotony of some women's lives.'

'Oh yes, indeed I do,' replied Miss Norreys. 'If I did not, do you think you would now be sitting here with me? I could never pretend sympathy I did not feel. Lady Campion told me a little, very little, about you, but, of course, I understand you far better from yourself. I sympathise with all my heart in your wish to do something—to strike out a career for yourself.'

'Oh yes,' said Winifred, breathlessly.

'No one could sympathise in it more heartily than I,' Hertha went on. 'For years, you know, I worked hard for my mother and brother, and—though I don't need you to tell me about it—I am sure that some similar motive inspires you, as well as the wish to feel yourself *some one, something*, which an energetic woman, placed as you are, must feel.'

The colour rose a little in Winifred's face. Hertha, with instinctive delicacy, glanced away. She knew that direct owning to poverty was painful to some people.

'Ye-es,' said Miss Maryon, at last. 'It is—there are—more than one motive. I want to help my sister, too, the one you saw. I am positively

certain she has great talent for painting if she had a chance of cultivating it.

'Indeed?' said Hertha, 'that simplifies *her* line of action. What she has to do is to test herself. Then you want to help her to get good teaching, and, I suppose, to make a home for her in London? Yes, she is too young and too beautiful to attempt anything of the kind without some one to take care of her. And—can you both be spared at home?'

'We have another sister at home, and, though my father is in delicate health, my mother is well and active. We have thought about it for a long time—Celia and I.'

'Poor souls! Two fewer to provide for, no doubt, is a consideration,' thought Hertha.

'Does Mrs Balderson know about it? Is she likely to help you in any way?' she asked aloud. 'I do not know her personally, but I have heard she is truly kind.'

'She has been very kind in having us here. But she would not sympathise in our plans. She is—old-fashioned, I suppose. She thinks girls should stay quietly at home.'

'Ah, indeed,' said Hertha, her mind rapidly picturing to itself what, in such a case, the 'staying quietly at home' must mean: the poor,

unbeautiful surroundings, the colourless lives, the pain and almost degradation of the terrible 'genteel poverty.'

'But she *is* very kind,' repeated Winifred, her conscience smiting her; 'she asked us out of kindness. She would like us to marry,' with a little smile. 'But, of course, I never shall. She likes Celia the best, I think.'

Again Hertha's imagination jumped to hasty conclusions. 'I see it all,' she thought. 'She wants to show the pretty one to advantage, to give her a chance, as people say.'

'And is there any prospect of Celia's marrying?' she asked.

Winifred shook her head.

'Oh no!' she replied, with a touch of something like indignation, which Miss Norreys could not understand. 'Celia would never change so—she would not desert me.'

'But, my dear Miss Maryon, it might be a very good thing, if and always supposing, of course, that it was some one she cared for,' said Hertha. 'Placed as'——

'There is no use discussing remote contingencies,' interrupted Winifred, and Miss Norreys, imagining that her pride in her sister made it bitter to realise that the possibility was

remote, beautiful though Celia was, said no more.

'Well, then, to be practical,' she replied, 'what you have told me makes me feel that the proposal I have to lay before you may suit you even better than I had expected. For you cannot have Celia with you, or—or afford good teaching for her until you have made a beginning yourself, and got a home ready.'

'I must certainly have somewhere to bring her to,' said Winifred, evasively, 'and somewhere for myself too,' with a smile. 'I should like to get things a little in order, as it were, so far settled, for, you see, I am old enough to decide for myself, before I tell my people at home about it. It would make my mother so much less anxious if I could tell her it *was* settled.'

'But,' exclaimed Hertha, rather taken aback, 'your people do know what you are intending? You are not acting against their wishes?'

'Oh no—that is to say, they do know, thoroughly,' said Winifred, with evident candour. 'As for their *wishes*—why, no, mother does not *wish* us to leave home. Mothers never do—do they? She would like us all to stay near her always, I suppose. But she *understands*, and—she is very kind.'

'Kind' struck Hertha as a somewhat curious word to use of a mother in such a case.

'She should be very proud of you both,' she said quickly, while her mind's eye pictured the overworked parson's wife reluctant to let her girls go forth to make their way, even though the relief and satisfaction of seeing them in the path of success could not but be great. 'If you get on well, it cannot but be a comfort to her, I should think.'

'She knows Celia has great talent, and she does think it should be cultivated,' replied Winifred, and again something in her tone slightly perplexed Miss Norreys. 'I don't think she feels the same about me, for, you see, I have no very special line. But there are quantities of *men* who have no very special line, and yet do well, and are of use in their generation. So why not women?'

And she looked up inquiringly at Hertha.

'Why not? There is no reason against it when the motives are sound and good, as in your case I think it must be,' Miss Norreys replied, half hoping that this would lead to further confidence. But Winifred did not speak, so she went on: 'The chance I have to tell you of really *is* a chance, though it may not sound very splendid.

Through an old friend of mine, Mr Montague, you can have the offer of a post in the Reasonable Help Society, provided, of course, you can pass a certain examination. It is a very well-managed society: they try to kill two birds with one stone by engaging to do the work—charitable work, of course—girls like yourself, who—who feel they should do something for themselves, to be independent, and in many cases, with the hope of eventually helping their friends.

'It is right they should be paid,' said Miss Maryon, quickly. 'I have thought a good deal about that. I don't believe in unpaid work.'

'I should be very sorry to make such a sweeping assertion,' said Hertha, with a smile. 'However, in this case, the question is not raised. You *will* be paid—fifty pounds a year to begin, and the prospect of an increase, if all goes well. But remember,' as she caught sight of a bright gleam of satisfaction lighting up Winifred's face, 'fifty pounds are not a fortune. You are very inexperienced. I daresay it seems a great deal to you, but it won't go very far.'

'I am not so inexperienced as you think, dear Miss Norreys,' said Winifred, quietly. 'I shall be able to manage, and to have Celia with me before long. It is not the money, but the feeling

that it is a *beginning*, something really to do, and that I shall take the greatest interest in. There is nothing I have more at heart than the problem of how to help without pauperising our lower classes. I may be of more use to the Reasonable Help Society than would be thought likely,' she concluded, with a funny little touch of self-assertion.

'I hope so, I am sure—and with all my heart I hope the Reasonable Help Society will be of use to you. Then you decide on accepting it?—that is to say, on offering yourself as a candidate for the post?'

'Oh dear, yes. Most certainly I do,' said Winifred. 'And I thank you a thousand times.'

'It was much more Mr Montague's doing than mine,' said Hertha. 'And, indeed, the whole thing was a chance—a lucky one, I trust.'

'And can you tell me when I must call at the office, or must I write, or what?' asked Winifred.

'Yes,' Miss Norreys replied. 'Mr Montague sent full particulars. You must call any morning, but the sooner the better, at this address;' and she held out a paper.

'I will go to-morrow,' said Winifred.

'And if you say that you have no home in London, the secretary will give you a list of

lodgings where some of their employees live. Nothing very grand, of course, plain, but not uncomfortable, with thoroughly respectable people.'

'Oh that will be all right,' said Winifred. 'I will find something to begin with, I daresay, and if I don't like it, I can easily move.'

Her tone made Hertha rather uneasy again.

'But all moves are expensive,' she said. 'Try to settle down if possible.'

'Ah, well, yes, if I can get rooms for Celia too.'

'*Rooms!*' thought Hertha. 'What does she expect? But she must buy experience, I suppose.'

So after detailing to her some more of the information received from Mr Montague, she let her go, without volunteering further advice.

And Winifred, feeling that she had taken the first plunge into independence and 'a career,' bade her new friend good-bye for the present, with many times repeated expressions of gratitude.

CHAPTER VII.

AT WHITE TURRETS.

A CLEAR, mild, late-autumn morning in the country—clear, though the sunshine, what there is of it, is thin and pallid; mild, yet with a certain slow chill in the air which is not inspiriting; over and through and behind all, the indescribable autumn feeling, the subdued consciousness of warmth and brightness passed, as distinct as is age from youth, from the equally indescribable hopefulness of even the least genial spring-time.

Yet there is no need to remind any one of the charm of such a day at such a season. Perhaps there is none, amidst the many fascinations of our ever-the-same yet ever-varying journey through space, more powerful, more irresistible, than the fascination of the fall of the year. As a rule, it is the young who love autumn best: they can afford to enjoy its subdued vitality as a contrast to their

own overflowing life. The old, or the growing old, on the contrary, forget sometimes their own failing powers in the delightful exhilaration of reviving nature around them, in the songs of the birds and the blossoming of the buds, in the new life which, to many, one would hope, tells of deeper truths than lie on the surface.

A girl was standing by a window—an open window, so mild was the morning—overlooking a gravelled terrace walk. She was fairly tall, brown haired, and gentle eyed. Not as lovely as her sister Celia; scarcely, perhaps, as handsome, strictly speaking, as Winifred, the eldest of the three, yet with an undeniable charm of her own—a very gracious presence. For this was Louise, the second of the Maryon daughters.

And all about her seemed harmonious. The simple yet stately room, with the ancient white wainscoting, so rare in an English country-house, the perfect, though old-fashioned, appointments of the breakfast-table behind her: above all, perhaps, the scene from the window—the broad terrace, with the miniature ramparts, and the stiff, quaint, flower-beds beneath; and the park beyond, fading into dark masses of trees in the distance.

But Louise Maryon was not looking out; her eyes were fixed on a letter in her hand. And as

the door opened quietly she looked up with eagerness.

'They are coming, mamma!' she exclaimed joyfully. 'They are really coming to-night. Winifred's mysterious business is settled at last, Celia says. Isn't it delightful that we shall have them really back to-day? But'—as a glance showed her that her mother, too, held a letter in her hand, and that her face scarcely reflected the pleasure Louise herself was feeling—'have you heard, too? Is your letter from Winifred?'

'Yes, dear,' Mrs Maryon replied, with a little sigh. 'It is from Winifred. Your father was awake early, so the bag was brought up-stairs—you found yours on the table? I sent it down. Yes, mine is from Winifred. Of course I am delighted they are really coming, but, Louise, I am afraid the experiment of this visit to London has done no good. Your sister is evidently as determined as ever.'

Louise's face fell a little, more, perhaps, out of sympathy with her mother's disappointment than from any keen sense of it herself. She had not expected otherwise.

'*Celia* seems to me to be in a most reasonable frame of mind,' she said. 'Nothing could be sweeter and nicer than all she says.'

'Celia is different,' said the mother. 'There is sense and reason in her wish to cultivate the talent she believes she has, or at least to find out how much she has. She would never have been unreasonable if Winifred had not put it into her head;' and Mrs Maryon sighed again.

She was more like her eldest daughter in appearance—the slight, tall figures and fairer complexions of the younger girls were from their father's side. Yet, in character, Winifred more resembled Mr Maryon, though the long chastening of delicate health—since a terrible accident some years before—had so mellowed and refined an originally self-willed and almost despotic nature, that papa's 'gentleness' and well-nigh womanly consideration for others were household words in the family. The mother, full of intelligence and good sense, was nevertheless constitutionally timid and even shy. So, between Mr Maryon's fear of his own natural imperiousness, and his wife's almost morbid want of self-assertion, the clever, precocious child had developed into the self-willed, self-opinionated, though always candid and high-principled girl.

In the case of the other sisters, no bad results appeared to have followed their rather exceptional up-bringing. Louise was essentially well balanced

and unselfish; Celia too talented to be self-engrossed. She lived in a world where self is quickly lost sight of, though her great capacity for affection kept her from losing touch with the real people and the real life around her.

Louise, as she took her place at the breakfast-table, tried to think of what she could say to cheer her mother.

'I suppose Winifred must judge for herself, mamma,' she said. 'You have always said so, and, after all, even if she is away from home for a few months, she may settle down all the better afterwards.'

'I doubt it,' said Mrs Maryon. 'Once she has tasted the sweets of independence, and a more exciting life, I doubt if she will ever "settle down," as you say, unless she married, and of that —at least of *the* marriage we hoped for—I suppose there is no chance now.'

'I am very sorry for Lennox,' said Louise, simply. 'But for his sake, her being away for a while may be better. I think he is accepting the thing—but still her being away *would* make it easier. And then he need not leave off coming about us as usual. We should miss him, and it would be hard upon him, for he is rather lonely.'

'It has been hard upon him already. Yes, if

I could think Winifred would have enough of it in a while, as you say, Louise! But she seems already to have got one foot into that half-Bohemian society she has always been longing for. I cannot think how she has managed it from so solid a house as the Baldersons'! Her letter is full of some singer—a Miss Norreys—whom she has taken a perfect "furore" for, and who, she says, has been most kind in helping her. Really, as if the child were a poor little governess! And to think of all the responsibilities awaiting her here—of all that must be hers some day! No, I cannot see how Winifred can blind herself to the duties so distinctly hers. And she will fall more and more out of it all. She will know nothing about the property or its management.'

'But, mamma dear, we may hope that papa will live a great many years. He is no worse than ten years ago. And Winifred may fall in love and marry some day. It would do her all the good in the world,' said Louise.

'Some actor or singer, perhaps,' said her mother. 'I should be thankful she has no taste for the stage, and no special musical talent, for there is no knowing what she might not have wished to do in such a case.'

'The Baldersons are very musical. I suppose

that is how Winifred has met Miss Norreys. Celia speaks of her too. She says she is really quite charming, and that Winifred can get nothing but good from her. But what it is that she is "helping" Winifred about, Celia does not say.'

'I wish we could see her—this Miss Norreys, I mean,' said Mrs Maryon. 'She seems to be acquiring so much influence over Winifred.'

'I have heard her name, I am sure,' said Louise. 'Well, anyway, mother dear, we shall know all about it in a few hours. So try not to worry in the meantime. Shall I go up to papa now? Will he be ready for me?'

For to a great extent Louise acted as her father's secretary, and the post was no sinecure.

'Mr Peckerton is coming this afternoon,' said Mrs Maryon, 'and that always tires your father. Make him do as little as possible beforehand. Perhaps you had better run up to him now and talk the day over. I shall be busy too—the vicar is coming about the new schoolmistress.'

'And there are all the Christmas presents for the children to go over,' said Louise. 'I am thankful Celia is coming back.'

The journey from London was not a very long one. Late in the season as it was, the sun had not yet set when Winifred and Celia found them-

selves steaming into their own station, where a carriage and a pencilled note from Louise awaited them.

'I have been longing to go to meet you, but find I cannot manage it, as Mr Peckerton is here and papa needs me. So delightful to know you are coming home.'

'Dear me!' said Winifred, when she and Celia were comfortably settled in the carriage, and bowling away quickly on the smooth high-road to White Turrets—'dear me, what a "Little Peddlington" life it will seem after London! Poor Louise, as full of her accounts and village matters and old women's flannel petticoats as ever, I suppose!'

Celia did not reply. Winifred's tone jarred upon her. She was gazing out of the window at the reddening sky, just where the sun was setting. It was a lovely evening, and her whole feelings were touched and quickened by the returning home. A moment or two later they drove in at their own lodge, and then a turn in the avenue—a grand old avenue, bordered by trees which had lived through more than one or two human generations—brought them, while still at some distance, within view of the house itself.

It could scarcely have been seen to greater advantage than standing out as it did against the

autumn sky, with the sunset glow illuminating the clouds, banked up, blue-gray and cold looking near the horizon; though overhead the pearly, neutral-tinted expanse, already shadowing into darker tones, still told of the mildness and calm of the fast-waning day.

'Look, Winifred, look,' cried the younger girl, 'did you ever see the house more picturesque? It has that wonderful old-world look—the "fairy-story look," I used to call it when I was little. It is as pure white as if it had just sprung up by magic, and yet it seems as if it might have been standing there for thousands of years—as if the White Cat had just ridden off from the door on a hunting-party.'

'Or as if the Sleeping Beauty were sleeping there still, waiting for the perfect prince, who never comes except in your fairy tales, Celia,' said Winifred, with a touch of contempt in her tone. But the fancy did not displease her sister. She only laughed softly.

'Well, *we* don't waste much thought on him,' she said. 'Dear old White Turrets! I do love it. It doesn't need a prince, Winifred. You know it has always prospered best in the hands of a woman.'

Winifred's face clouded.

'I wish you would forget that old nonsense,' she said. 'There are women and women—no one will understand that. It may suit some women to drone along and never leave their own village, but it wouldn't suit *me*, and that is all that I am concerned about.'

Celia sighed, but her sigh was not a very profound one. She was feeling too happy for that.

'If I could only get up and down to London for painting lessons every day by magic,' she said, 'I should never want to leave home at all—never.'

'Nonsense, Celia,' said Winifred. 'You would never do anything worth doing if you tied yourself to the out-of-the-world sort of life we have here. You need to imbibe the spirit of the day. You need friction, a hundred inspiring and inspiriting influences, even if you *are* a genius.'

'Winifred,' said the younger girl reproachfully, 'how can you speak so? Heaven knows I have never thought myself a genius. Still—I daresay there is something in what you say. Certainly I need to test myself with others, if that is what you mean by friction. But oh! here we are—and there is dear old Louise, looking just as she did the day we left, only a good deal happier.'

'Poor dear Louise,' repeated Winifred. 'Yes,

she is the modern incarnation of one of Miss Austen's heroines. But it *is* nice to see her again.'

And the greetings between the three sisters could not have been more affectionate and loving than they were.

It was not till much later that evening that Louise got Celia to herself for a good talk. At dinner, with both the father and mother present, the conversation had been bright and full of interest, Winifred describing, with her ready flow of language, what she and her sister had seen and done and been struck by in London, and Celia contributing her quota. Questions about the Baldersons, too, were asked and answered, and a casual observer would have imagined the family 'understanding' to have been perfect.

But below it all, the five themselves were conscious of a certain constraint: something was smouldering beneath the surface, and Mrs Maryon's face, when in repose, showed lines of fresh anxiety and troubled anticipation.

'I won't keep you up to-night, my dear mother,' said Winifred, as bed-time approached—Mr Maryon, feeling the effects of the afternoon's business with Mr Peckerton, having already been wheeled away in his invalid-chair. 'You look

tired, and I want to write a letter in my own room for the first post in the morning. But to-morrow we must have a regular good talk, and you shall hear everything there is to tell.'

'Celia,' said Louise, when the two younger sisters were by themselves in Celia's room, 'I mustn't keep you up long, for you look rather tired too. But do tell me—what has Winifred to say? What has she been doing, or what is she going to do? Of course you could not tell much in your letters—we settled that before you left—and when Lennox saw you, you had only just arrived there. But I am so anxious to know everything, for several reasons.'

'Was Lennox in very low spirits when he came back?' asked Celia in the first place, instead of answering Louise. 'That's *one* thing settled. It's as certain as anything can be that he need never *dream* of Winifred. I have come not to wish it. She is too prejudiced to do him justice.'

'I think so too,' said Louise. 'It is only for papa's and mamma's sake I regret it now. No, he was not low-spirited. He has made up his mind to it, I think. And'—she hesitated—'he even laughs a little at Winifred sometimes.'

Celia's colour rose.

'That is very presumptuous of him,' she said,

but she checked herself. 'Of course he can't understand her, so perhaps it is a good thing if he takes that line. She has quite decided, Louise. It is all settled. She is going to London in January, for good.'

Louise drew a deep breath.

'I cannot believe it,' she said. 'Leaving all she might do here, when every day I see more and more how valuable her strong brain and clear judgment would be. For papa, though not worse, is not *better*, Celia. He is so quickly exhausted. I do my best, but I am *not* the clever one of the family. I can't understand it. Going out to seek for work when it is at her very feet, crying to be done.'

'It is not work Winifred wants; it is a career,' said Celia, laconically.

'But she has no special gift—no—no "vocation" to anything in particular,' said Louise.

'She thinks it is her vocation to show that women should be as free as men,' said Celia. 'She is full of organised benevolent work just now, and she wants to prove that women can do it as well as—no, far better than men. But I have tacitly promised her to let her tell all particulars herself, so I had better not say any more.'

'Only one thing—this Miss—Miss something

Norreys, that Winifred has mentioned so enthusiastically in her letters—has she influenced her?' asked Louise.

'She is the best friend Winifred could have,' Celia replied. 'She is both beautiful and talented and good. Yes, and wise too. But—I have not seen her much. I doubt if she really understands the position.'

There was a little silence. Then Louise spoke again.

'Celia,' she said, with a touch of hesitation, '*you* have changed a little—or a great deal? You don't look at things so entirely from Winifred's point of view, do you?'

'No,' said Celia, frankly, 'I don't. I have changed. I hope, perhaps, I have grown wiser, that I have learned to see things outside ourselves more than I did. Winifred would tell you it was all the other way,' she added, with a smile. '*She* thinks I have grown narrow and conventional.'

'But you haven't changed about yourself—about your wish to see what talent you have—to test yourself, as you say?' asked Louise, eagerly. 'I should not like that.'

'No, I feel just the same. I feel that I *must* try—that is to say, unless some very clear overmastering question of duty interferes. I know I

have some talent, and, even if it is nothing remarkable, I think I should cultivate it, and if'—here the girl's voice trembled a little—'if it *were* to be remarkable—well, all the more reason for developing it.'

'Yes. You are right. I know you are,' said Louise. 'I am so glad. But then it is about Winifred you have changed?'

'Not exactly—or rather, it is about Winifred, as a type of so many girls nowadays. I cannot go as far as she does, and yet you see the position is very invidious. It makes *me* seem selfish and presumptuous and—almost conceited,' and Celia's face clouded over. 'A very little thing began the change in me,' she went on. 'An almost chance remark of Eric Balderson's. Then I tried to think it out, and I wondered at myself for having agreed with Winifred as I did. For her case is a peculiarly strong one the *other* way, I now see. Her life is before her. It is not like that of some women who have reason to feel hedged in and stunted, even though I am beginning to think that very often it is their own fault. I am afraid a good deal comes from love of excitement, though, *of course,* there is the other side of it too. But it would take hours to tell you all I have been thinking.'

'And I have kept you up too long already, dear,' said Louise. 'Only—Celia, I must tell you one thing—the White Weeper has been seen again.'

Celia started, and grew white herself.

'Oh, Louise,' she said, 'I wish you hadn't told me to-night. You don't mind, I know, but'——

'Celia, dearest, I'm so sorry,' said Louise, penitently. 'I never knew you minded it either. I was, in a way, glad of it. I fancied it might have some effect on Winifred, even though she only mocks at it. It *is* curious, for it is a good while since it has been seen. And even if it is only some peculiar shadow, some atmospheric effect, as people try to make out, still—its being seen just now might make Winifred think.'

Celia shook her head.

'She would not allow it, even if it did,' she said. 'It's no good telling her about it. She only gets very cross. When'—and again she trembled a little—'when was it seen, and by whom, and where?'

'Twice,' said Louise, 'just as usual. In the yew-tree avenue. Barbara saw it the first time, and then one of the gardeners—the new one, quite a young man. It is always new-comers who

see it. And none of the people about know of it, except Barbara and Horton, and one or two of the very old ones, who *never* speak of it. Luckily the young man told Horton of it first, and Horton bound him over not to speak of it. He told him he would be laughed at, and so he would.'

'How long ago?' asked Celia.

'Last week. She, or it, was crying quietly, Barbara said. Not violently. So Barbara took it as just a gentle warning—not any very dreadful thing. She is quite satisfied that it was for Winifred.'

'I wish Winifred could see it for herself,' said Celia, with a little not unnatural irritation. She was feeling both tired and frightened. 'Louise, you will leave the door wide open between our rooms. I can't understand your not being frightened.'

'Well, anyway, dear, you know it *never* comes into the house,' said Louise, reassuringly.

'It never has, that we know of,' said Celia, 'but still, if it were much provoked or defied. No, no, Louise, don't tell Winifred about it. I should be afraid what she might say or do, for she is never frightened of anything.'

Louise looked greatly distressed.

'Dear Celia,' she said, 'I wish you wouldn't

Barbara saw it the first time, and then one of the gardeners.

take it that way. *I* feel quite differently about it. I look upon the White Weeper as a kind of protector—a living spirit who wants to keep harm from us.'

'Do you?' said Celia, rather grimly. 'Well, then, I'm afraid I'm like the boy who, when he was told he need not mind the dark, as his guardian angel was always beside him, replied that that was just what he was "afeared on." I don't know if I've a bad conscience—compared with *yours*, I daresay I have—but I know that I devoutly trust I shall never be favoured with the sight of our family ghost. Do you mean to say, Louise, that you would have courage to speak to her?'

Louise hesitated.

'I don't know,' she said, 'I hope I would. Yes, I think I would if it were to be for good to any of those I love.'

'I do believe you would. *You* are an angel;' and she drew Louise's wavy brown head down to her, as the elder girl was turning to leave her, and kissed her tenderly.

The door was left open—wide open—that night between their rooms, but the sisters' slumbers were undisturbed. Louise was too happy to know that Celia was beside her again to think of any-

thing else, even if she had been given to ghostly fears, which she certainly was not.

And Celia was happy too, though tired—happy to be at home again, and to feel that Louise and she understood each other so thoroughly.

The next morning brought about the 'long talk' between Winifred and her mother. It was not so very long after all, for the same ground had been gone over so often that there was not much new to say. And when Mrs Maryon became convinced that the visit to London had only intensified her daughter's determination—had, indeed, practically resulted in Winifred's taking upon herself engagements which it would have been scarcely honourable to break—she had the wisdom to accept the position, and not to add bitterness to the whole by further and useless discussion.

But though the daughter went singing up-stairs to her own quarters, congratulating herself that things had passed off more easily than she had expected, the mother's face looked sadly pained and anxious when Louise ventured to join her, after making sure that the interview with her elder sister was over.

'May I come in, mamma?' she said. 'Tell me—— Oh dear, you are looking very troubled!'

'Yes, dear, I am feeling so,' Mrs Maryon

replied. 'Winifred has really carried out her intentions. She has—fancy, Louise—she has engaged herself as some sort of sub-secretary or clerk to one of these new philanthropic societies. The Reasonable Help Society, I think she calls it. I daresay it is a very good thing—no doubt it is—and besides helping the poor, I daresay it provides employment for many penniless girls of a better class. But Winifred! with her position and responsibilities, and the home duties she *could* do so well, if she would—Louise, it is almost incredible.'

'It is better than becoming a woman doctor or an hospital nurse, surely,' said Louise.

'I don't know. She has no taste for either. But if she had become an hospital nurse it might have brought her to her senses, and at least she would have acquired some useful knowledge.'

'So she may, as things are,' replied Louise, who, whatever her own feelings, tried determinedly to look on the bright side of things for her mother's sake. 'And really, vexing as it is, her pertinacity is rather fine—worthy of a better cause. How clever of her to have got this thing! for I am sure it is difficult, unless the society is glad to find a girl who gives her services for nothing.'

'Oh dear, no. It is not even that,' said Mrs Maryon. 'She is to have fifty pounds a year! She does not approve of the *principle* of unpaid labour, she says. She got the offer of this post through this new friend of hers—Miss Norreys. I think Mrs Balderson should have been more careful whom she introduced to the girls. Miss Norreys must be a very advanced "women's rights" sort of a person.'

'Celia says not. She says she is perfectly charming and perfectly womanly,' said Louise.

'Then—she cannot have understood all about Winifred. I wish I could see her. I shall certainly not allow Celia to join Winifred in London next spring, without knowing more of this young woman, who seems to have done all the mischief.'

'Oh no, mamma. It was done before Winifred ever saw her. You know we *hoped*—though not very much—that London might have changed Winifred's ideas. If it has to be, Miss Norreys may be a very good friend.'

'I should like to see her,' Mrs Maryon repeated. And then she added, with a sigh: 'Winifred has accepted this post for January. She will not be much longer at home.'

CHAPTER VIII.

AN INVITATION AND A JOURNEY.

BERTHA NORREYS stood staring at a letter—or letters rather—which she held in her hand, with an air of perplexity and surprise.

'I can't make it out,' she said to herself. 'It seems so odd and inconsistent. And—I have not done so very much for her after all. They write as if I were her dearest friend, and in a sense responsible for her! I like her. There is a great deal of good in her, but the only real service I have done her since she came to London was getting Mr Montague to beg her in again, that time she was given notice of dismissal for defiance of the society's rules.'

A smile came over Miss Norreys's face at the recollection of the circumstances, and with the letters still in her hand, she sat down at her neat breakfast-table. And when she had poured out

her coffee and begun to eat, she glanced through them again. They had both come together, one from Winifred enclosing the other, which was from Mrs Maryon, simply inscribed to Miss Norreys, but without any address.

This was Winifred's:

'Dearest friend,' and the words again drew forth a smile from the reader—

'I have just received the enclosed from my mother. It was left open for me to read the contents. I hope you will not mind their asking you in this unceremonious way, though I confess I think they should have left the invitation to *me*. I am afraid you would find it dreadfully dull down there. I am not at all sure if I shall get down myself for Easter, as I scarcely see how I am to be spared here. If I go, it will be principally for poor little Celia's sake; though *now* it would, of course, be for yours too, should you possibly care to go. It certainly is very pretty in our part of the country in the spring. You will let me know what you decide?—Ever yours devotedly,

'Winifred R. V. Maryon.'

The enclosure was a slightly stiff and yet cordial invitation—an invitation which gave one the feeling that the writer had not the slightest doubt of its being at once and eagerly accepted—to Miss Norreys, to spend Easter week at White Turrets.

'You would give us pleasure by doing so,' wrote Mrs Maryon, 'and we should be glad to have an opportunity of thanking you for your kindness to my daughter, and of making the acquaintance of one to whom in her present life she looks for advice and direction. And there are several things I should be glad to talk over with you. We expect Winifred at the time I name, and you and she could travel together. I think there are special return tickets issued about Easter, and I hope a little country air would do you good.'

Hertha read and re-read. Was there, or was there not, a slight touch of 'patronisingness' in the letter? The idea rather amused her.

'It is almost impossible,' she said to herself. '"Poor and proud" explains it, I suppose. Winifred was delighted to get the fifty pounds salary. I wish they had not asked me, for *any* visitor causes expense when people are so poor, and unaccustomed to that sort of thing. No doubt they think *me* very poor too—poorer than I am now, I am glad to say; the railway fare information is evidently given with that idea.'

Then she poured out a second cup of coffee, and proceeded with her cogitations.

I have several invitations for Easter, but with-

out being cynical or suspicious I know that some, at least, of them are more for my voice than me. And my voice had much better stay at home or go to sleep. And it would be a rest of its kind to be with a simple country family like that—no dressing to speak of—I need not take a maid. It must be a pretty quaint place, too, I fancy. I wonder if "White Turrets" is the name of a village, or what? It doesn't seem likely that their house would have so important a name, though there are old farm-houses in some countries, scarcely more than cottages, with very grand names. I remember'—she glanced at the letter again. 'It must be their house or the village, for I see the railway station and post-town are both different. Dear me—the Maryons are rather extravagant as to note-paper! If one didn't know it was impossible, this might have come from some big place!'

Then her thoughts reverted to her own plans.

'I should like to see that pretty younger sister again,' she thought. 'And, after all, it will not increase any real or imaginary responsibility about Winifred if I come to a clear understanding with her mother. Not that I would shirk responsibility if it were a duty, but in this case it would be a mockery. She is not a girl to be either led or advised, and the reason that I *am* still her dearest

friend is that I have—except on that one occasion —left her to buy her own experience. She needs to do so.'

The 'one occasion' to which Hertha's thoughts referred had been that of a crisis in Winifred's relations with the society for which she worked—a crisis which, at the cost of considerable mortification, had left her a wiser woman. For it was only the finish up of a series of annoyances which had begun almost from the first day of her engagement, the cause of which may be summed up very shortly—Miss Maryon's absolute ignorance of the meaning of the word obedience.

She was quite sure she knew the best way to manage the work better than those who had been at it for years; she was brimful of eagerness to distinguish herself, and of a *kind* of enthusiasm; she was energetic and hard-working, but she was entirely without deference. And underlying all her talk about the dignity of labour, the contemptibleness of an ordinary woman's home-life, was a strong, though unexpressed belief that she was doing the society no small honour in working for it, and that, by some instinct which she did not seek to define, the society should be aware of the fact.

The result of all this can be easily imagined.

Though valuable as a steady and zealous worker, she was entirely inexperienced, and want of compliance with the rules was not to be endured.

'We can get scores of girls better fitted for the post at any moment,' said the much-worried secretary in reply to Mr Montague's entreaties that they would give his protégée another trial. And in reality it was far more owing to the skilful pleadings, made in all good faith, of Hertha's friend, as to the importance of the salary to a girl so placed, the disappointment her dismissal would cause to her friends as well as to herself, than from any conviction of Miss Maryon's special abilities, that the secretary at last gave in.

He knew Mr Montague well, and his post had given him exceptional opportunities for the cultivation of discernment.

'Are you *sure*,' he said towards the close of the interview, looking up with a keen glance from under his bushy eyebrows, 'are you *sure* this girl is really so dependent on her work? There is no story about her that we have not been told, is there? It 's no case of a self-willed young woman running away from home—an uncongenial stepmother, or any nonsense exaggerated into import-

ance? She is not a girl to give in, even if in the wrong.'

Mr Montague started.

'What makes you fancy such a thing?' he asked.

The secretary considered.

'I can scarcely say—an impression, perhaps. Still there are trifling circumstances—she is very careless about money, thinks nothing of hansoms, for instance. And you know one of her great offences has been giving charity without permission, and, naturally, most injudiciously'—— He gave an impatient exclamation. 'Enough to bring our whole society into disrepute,' he said, 'contravening its very *raison-d'être*.'

Mr Montague felt uncomfortable, and yet he had no real grounds for misgiving.

'I can only repeat the reason of any interest I feel in her,' he said, 'and that is that she is a friend of Miss Norreys—the last woman in the world to aid or abet any silly girl in the sort of conduct you suggest.'

The secretary's brow cleared.

'True,' he said, 'I had forgotten.'

Mr Montague called that very day to relate his success to Miss Norreys, but she was not at home. Then he contented himself with a note, merely

stating that Winifred was to have another chance, feeling that any further discussion about her would be more satisfactory in speaking than in writing. He tried to see Hertha again, but again failed, and then a summons to an invalid sister at Cairo took him out of England for several weeks, without his meeting Miss Norreys at all.

Mrs Maryon's invitation was accepted, simply, and with no effusive expressions of gratitude, though with all the kindly acknowledgment that it seemed to Hertha to call for.

'I have been undecided where to go at Easter,' wrote Miss Norreys, 'but, among several invitations, none seems to promise me the quiet I really feel I need so surely as your very thoughtful one. It will be pleasant, too, to travel down with your daughter, for I have not seen her for some time, she, as well as I, being so busy. Indeed, I feel that you greatly overrate any little service I may have had it in my power to render her. My *sympathy*, as I think she knows, she can always count upon.'

Mrs Maryon read this with a feeling of some perplexity. She could not make up her mind what she *should* feel about and towards this Miss Hertha Norreys. She handed the letter to Louise.

'I cannot quite decide if we shall like her or not,' she said. 'What is there in her way of writing that is not quite—I don't know what to call it—not "deferential," that is too strong, for I suppose she is really a perfect gentlewoman; but almost as if she thought we were "out of everything," as if rest and quiet were all she could possibly expect here?'

'Well, to a certain extent they are,' said Louise with a smile. 'Very likely Winifred has impressed upon her the extreme monotony and dullness of our life. But I suppose what you feel is the tone of the emancipated young woman of the day, mother—though from Celia's description of her I fancied Miss Norreys *above* that. However, we shall soon see her for ourselves, and I do agree with you that it is a very good thing she is coming. You will be able to judge for yourself about her—especially on Celia's account.'

'Of course, I hope she will enjoy it,' said Mrs Maryon. 'I don't like the idea of bringing her down here merely as a satisfaction to myself. Lennox has promised to spend Easter with us, hasn't he; and that friend of his, Captain Hillyer?'

'Yes,' said Louise, 'I'm sure we can count upon them. I wish Eric Balderson could have

come, but he is going abroad for three weeks with his mother. It would have been a little return for their great kindness to Winifred and Celia.'

'He knows he can come whenever he likes,' replied her mother. 'Yes, they were very kind; but sometimes, Louise, I wonder if that visit to London was not a mistake. It only seemed to clench matters.'

'No,' said Louise, 'nothing would have kept back Winifred, mother. Do try to believe that.'

Easter, though it fell early that year, was wonderfully bright and mild. The morning which saw Miss Norreys and Winifred off to the country was, as to weather, a real red-letter day, and Hertha's spirits, as she drove to the station where she and her 'devoted friend' were to meet, rose higher and higher.

Not that she was anticipating any special enjoyments in her visit. More than once she had asked herself if she were not acting foolishly in bestowing a whole week of her rare holidays upon perfect strangers—and strangers whom she had no particularly strong reasons for expecting to find sympathetic and congenial.

'I really don't know why I accepted,' she thought.

But this morning she felt a sort of reward—if reward she deserved, as she said to herself—in the beautiful promises of spring delights that met her even in the dingy streets through which a hansom rapidly carried her.

'What will it not be in the country?' was almost her first greeting to Winifred, when that young lady appeared, more punctually than was her habit, in honour of her expected guest. 'If this weather lasts it will be perfectly—*heavenly*. Primroses and gorse always picture to me the streets of gold far more exquisitely than the thought of the hard, cold metal.'

And her eyes sparkled, and her beautiful expressive face flushed with the quick instinctive response to nature which was one of her characteristics.

Winifred looked at her in some surprise. This phase of Miss Norreys's character was new to her, but as it *was* Miss Norreys and no one else, the girl's instinct was to admire and not criticise.

'You make me afraid to say what I have been wishing all the morning,' she said with a little smile.

'Indeed, and what is that?' inquired Hertha.

'Oh,' said Winifred, 'it just struck me, seeing this nice weather, how delightful, how much more delightful, it would have been to have a week's holiday in London with you. How many places we could have gone to see; what long charming mornings we could have spent, reading and talking, at the British Museum, for instance! Whereas—oh dear, I can scarcely hope to have you much to myself down at White Turrets.'

'But it is the *country* that makes all the difference in the world,' said Hertha. 'Even if I had not fixed to go, I don't think anything would have kept me in London to-day. Everything, every leaf, every bird's twitter, every breath of air, seems to be calling us out of the dust and glare of the weary streets.'

'I suppose it's all a question of novelty,' said Winifred. 'You see spring in the country is such an old experience to me. There's nothing new in it.'

'Nothing new!' repeated Hertha, with a touch of scorn. 'You don't suppose *I* have always lived in a town, do you? But as for "nothing new" in the spring—why it is *always* new. Ever-returning youth is its very essence. You cannot know anything of the true feeling of spring to speak so.'

'Perhaps not,' said Winifred, and for her the tone was very humble. 'I am not at all poetical: I have told you so.'

This softened Hertha, to whose nature the position of antagonism was never congenial.

'And I, perhaps, am foolishly enthusiastic in some ways,' she said. 'I feel so exuberant this morning.'

'I am so glad,' said Winifred fervently.

Then it proved to be time to take their tickets.

'You travel th—,' Miss Norreys was beginning, when Winifred interrupted her.

'I am *quite* pleased to go second,' she said eagerly. 'I—I thought you would like it better, and I arranged for it.'

'Poor girl!' thought Hertha. 'No doubt she has been saving in something else, to make up for the extra expense, which, doubtless, is for my sake. She has some very nice instincts about her, but I wish she could believe I don't mind going third. Still it might hurt her to urge the point.'

They found a comfortable compartment, not unpleasantly crowded, which at that season was rather exceptional good-luck, and, thanks partly to the presence of strangers, partly to Winifred's respect for her friend's remark, that she found few things more tiring than much talking in the

railway, the journey was for the most part performed in silence.

As they approached its end, they found themselves at last alone, and Hertha, who had been enjoying with quiet though intense appreciation the varying view from her window of fields and trees in their first exquisite tenderness of green, of primroses on the banks, and homesteads in whose nestling orchards the fruit-trees were already in blossom, turned to Winifred with a smile of glad pleasure.

'*Is* the country remarkably pretty and picturesque about here?' she asked, 'or is it all the charm of the contrast to my London eyes? It seems to me I have never loved a spring day really before.'

'I am so glad,' said Winifred, her own face reflecting the ready sympathy which, poetical or not, her devotion to Hertha never failed in. 'I am so very glad. It makes me hope that, after all, you will not find a week at home too dull and dreary. You see, we can be perfectly independent: you and I can stroll about the woods talking all day long if we like.'

'But you will want to see as much as you can of your mother and sisters, considering you are only with them for a week,' said Hertha. 'And

I shall like to get to know your pretty Celia a little better. Don't trouble about me, Miss Maryon, I beg you. I shall be perfectly content. I only hope I shall give no trouble, and that none of you will—will make the very least difference with my being there.'

Winifred looked slightly perplexed.

'Any difference!' she repeated, 'I don't see what difference your being with us *could* make, except the pleasure of having you. You see, in a country-house there is always a good deal of coming and going—there are not the "told-off" hours and days as in London. But, by-the-by,' she added suddenly, 'I did not see your maid at the station. Have you not brought her?'

'N—no,' said Miss Norreys, 'I said to Mrs Maryon, when I wrote, that I could do without her, I thought.'

'Oh, of course it will be all right,' said Winifred, quickly, at once thinking of the expense for her friend. 'Nothing will be easier than for—— But here we are,' she broke off, as at that moment the train slackened, and she turned to gather together the odds and ends lying about the carriage. 'Just put them near the door. Dawson will see to them,' she went on. Then she added, with a little rising colour, 'Don't you think—

would you mind calling me "Winifred"? before my own people, you know. I would so like it.'

'I will try,' said Hertha, smiling. 'I may forget sometimes, but as you wish it, I will try.'

'Thank you,' replied Winifred. 'Oh, there is Louise. Poor dear old Louise! She loves coming to meet arrivals. She is not very "interesting," you know—just a girl of the old type, but as good as gold. You need not be more with her than you like, if she bores you.'

'I am not afraid of that,' said Hertha; 'very few people bore me. But you have scarcely ever mentioned her to me. Which is she?' as she ran her eye along the platform, where they were just drawing up, and seeing no one quite answering to her mental picture of the probably dowdy, certainly commonplace, ungifted 'home' sister. 'Not that'——

How glad she was afterwards that she had never completed the sentence! The person she was on the point of pointing out was a remarkably plain, indeed, shabby, little young woman, barely answering to the word 'lady,' even in its most conventional sense. No, no, that *could* not be a sister of Winifred's, still less of beautiful Celia's.

'Oh, what pretty ponies!' she went on, hastily, as she caught sight of a charming low carriage,

just visible through the station gates, 'and what a sweet-looking girl driving them. How her hair glistens in the sunshine!'

'Yes,' said Winifred, calmly, 'that's Louise. Oh, Dawson—yes, take all these little things and bring them up with the luggage. Don't trouble about anything, dear Miss Norreys—they will be all right,' as an unexceptionably correct young groom proceeded to load himself with their smaller goods and chattels.

CHAPTER IX.

THE WHITE WEEPER.

HERTHA felt stupefied: but she had the presence of mind to say nothing more, and to wait for the further development of this extraordinary mystification. Winifred, evidently in happy security that their luggage was in good hands, led the way to the pony carriage, where a joyful—

'Dear Winifred—Miss Norreys—I am so glad to see you,' followed by excuses at not daring to leave her place, 'as the ponies are sometimes just a *little* fidgety with the trains, you know,' left no shadow of doubt as to the identity of the girl with the bright brown hair. 'There is comfortable room for three, as Winifred never minds sitting at the back,' Louise went on; and Winifred, after kissing her sister, endorsed this statement by declaring she would rather sit anywhere than have to drive.

'Do you not like driving?' said Miss Norreys, feeling that she must say something, though a curious sensation of indignation against Winifred for the sort of trick she seemed to have played her was fast taking form and growing in her heart.

Winifred shook her head. 'I am too short-sighted, for one thing,' she said, 'and then the only thing that I enjoy in driving is reading, and of course you can't read if you've got the reins.'

'Read!' repeated Miss Norreys, with a slight and not altogether approving smile. 'Certainly not. But reading'—— and she turned to Louise.

'Your sister soars above me,' she said. 'I can imagine no volume ever printed that one could glance at for an instant with such an open book of beauty before us as this;' and her eyes sparkled with that look of exquisite and intense enjoyment which, with some, we feel is almost 'akin to tears.' 'I don't think I *ever* felt the marvel and the magic of spring more than to-day.'

Louise glanced at her, and by the sweetness of the glance, and the kindness of the whole—not remarkably pretty, but thoroughly lovable and womanly face, Hertha felt that she ran no risk of being misunderstood.

'Yes,' the girl replied, 'a morning like this makes

one echo the "very good," with all one's heart, as far as Nature is concerned.'

Then a little sigh made itself heard.

'Winifred,' she said, 'you will be very sorry—papa is not well. He had one of his bad attacks yesterday. He is better, but of course very weak, as usual.'

'He must have been doing something imprudent,' said Winifred, with a touch of asperity which, with many people, is the expression of real anxiety. 'He has been so well lately.'

'It has been leading up to it, I fear,' said Louise. 'There has been a great deal of extra work, and I am afraid more of it has fallen on him than should have been the case, though I have done my best—I am not so clever or clear-headed as Winifred,' she added, with a smile, to Miss Norreys, 'and in a large prop'——

An exclamation from her companion interrupted her.

'What a *beautiful* old house! A perfect Sleeping Beauty's palace,' cried Miss Norreys. 'Do tell me whose it is. It must be a show place.'

It never occurred to her that the great white house, seen to peculiar advantage from their present point of view, as it rose among the trees,

its many latticed windows glistening in the sunshine—a sort of fairy dignity brooding over all—could be the Maryons' home. For though she felt that she had been, it seemed to her, inexcusably misled by Winifred as to her family's social position and means, she could not all at once have realised how 'very pleasant' were the material places in which their lines were laid.

Again Louise smiled, but this time with a surprised and almost reproachful glance of interrogation at her sister.

'Has not Winifred told you about our dear old home?' she said. 'We think there is nothing like it in the world. Winifred, have you never described it to Miss Norreys?'

'We have always had so many other things to talk of,' said Winifred, indifferently. 'Besides, I am not good at description.'

Hertha felt too provoked to look at her.

'You are right,' she said warmly to Louise, 'I am sure there cannot be another place like it. There is something dreamy about it, too, even in this brilliant sunshine.'

'You feel that?' said the girl eagerly. 'I am so glad. Yes, there is a very peculiar charm about it. I think it must be that it is so little changed from what it must have been hundreds of years

ago. It is so easy in one's fancy to re-people it with those who used to live in it and love it as we do now. Celia makes up all sorts of stories, based on the real history and legends of the place. Sometimes,' with a little laugh, 'she really frightens herself, for we *have* a ghost. We call her the'——

'Louise,' said Winifred, 'I just won't have you tell Miss Norreys that idiotic old story. I wish all ghost stories and nonsense of the kind were forbidden by Act of Parliament.'

'We should be in many ways the losers if it were so,' said Hertha, quietly. She could not understand Winifred, for there was evident earnestness under her half-laughing tone.

'What a strange, inconsistent girl she is!' thought the elder woman. 'She looks and seems honesty itself, it is *the* thing that attracted me to her; and yet *how* she has deceived, or at least misled me, and through me, Mr Montague and others. I feel hot when I think of it! Still she does not feel ashamed, and she must have known I should be undeceived as soon as I came here. And now this about ghosts? Is it possible she is really afraid of that sort of thing, and that it makes her dislike her home? She certainly does not look as if she had ever had a fright.'

Her silence during these cogitations had reacted on her companions, and for a few minutes neither spoke. Then Winifred turned abruptly to Louise.

'Who is with you?' she said, 'or who is coming? Lennox, of course, and any friends of his?'

'Yes,' Louise replied with the slightest possible increase of colour in her face. 'Lennox and Captain Hillyer. We shall be quite a cheerful Easter party, if only papa gets better quickly.'

'Dear me,' thought Miss Norreys, who was not above all feminine weaknesses, 'I do feel *very* angry with you, Winifred Maryon. I shall be all wrong about my clothes even: I shall have to telegraph for evening dresses.'

They were entering the drive by now. It was in keeping with all the rest. Long and straight, with thickly growing trees at each side, which gave an additional touch of mystery to the approach to the house. And though straight—so that the building standing somewhat high on its terraced summit, was conspicuous, the white flights of steps, gleaming like the walls themselves in the sunshine—the road dipped considerably, though gradually, here and there, causing all but the turrets, from which the house evidently took its name, momentarily to disappear.

Hertha, for the time, forgot all else in her

true sense of pleasure and interest. And no words she could have chosen, had she been the most calculating of mortals, would have made such a pleasing impression in the still dubious Mrs Maryon as those with which her new guest replied to her words of cordial but slightly constrained greeting.

'I have never been so enchanted by anything as by the first sight of your exquisite old house. I feel for once in real fairy-land.'

And graceful Celia, in her pale-gray dress, with a flush on her cheeks and shy welcome in her lovely eyes, might, indeed, have been the Sleeping Beauty just awakened.

That 'first impression' grew instead of fading, for it was well rooted. Both Mrs Maryon and her guest, so different in all else, so entirely unlike each other in the circumstances of their lives—the one so sheltered and protected, so curiously ignorant of life save in her own experience of it; the other, so early thrown upon herself, clung to by others at an age when most are still clinging and dependent; yet neither of the two either narrowed or hardened—these two, thanks to their genuine womanliness and unselfish single-mindedness, made friends, and such a friendship lasts.

By some tacit agreement the 'talk,' which on Mrs Maryon's part had been one underlying motive of the invitation, was during the first few days evaded. They did talk, but not so much about Winifred as of themselves, their personal feelings, and almost at once Mrs Maryon knew that she had utterly misjudged this girl, or woman, as Hertha preferred to call herself. Though it had arisen through no fault of her own, Winifred's mother was acutely conscious of the prejudice she had harboured against Miss Norreys, and it now seemed to her as if she could not do enough to make amends for the mistaken opinion she was yet far too delicate-minded to avow to its object; and Hertha, on her side, bided her time for the explanation which she knew was unavoidable. She was feeling her way, anxious not to blame Winifred unduly, difficult as she found it to understand the girl, or to sympathise with the line she had taken up.

But the long *tête-à-têtes* with her friend which Miss Maryon had looked forward to did not come to pass. Instead, Hertha seemed never tired of talking to her hostess, relating to her as they grew to know each other better, tender recollections of her own mother and bygone days, which she seldom now allowed herself to dwell upon.

And Winifred, one of whose good qualities was a remarkable absence of jealousy, consoled herself by reflecting that Hertha was probably actuated by real regard for herself.

'She sees that it will make everything easier for mamma to like and trust her, and thus to get rid of all these old prejudices against women with a career,' she thought.

Altogether the days passed pleasantly. Hertha allowed herself, for the time, to live in the present. Her interest in both Celia and Louise deepened; of Celia's unusual talent she became convinced, and she determined to do anything in her power to help the young girl to cultivate it. Mr Maryon recovered sufficiently to join the family party in the later hours of the day, when his cheerfulness made one almost forget his chronic invalidism.

'I like your cousin Lennox so much,' said Hertha one day to Celia; 'I had no idea from the little I had heard of him that he was so—well, interesting, as well as sterling.'

'I am so glad you like him,' said Celia, her face lighting up. 'Yes, he is *very* nice, though not, perhaps, exactly clever.'

'He is not stupid,' said Hertha.

'Oh, no; not stupid. He's just the sort of man that would have got on splendidly if he had

had a clever wife. It is such a pity,' and she sighed a little. 'I daresay you have noticed—he is so devoted to Winifred, and she doesn't care for him in the least.'

'To Winifred!' said Miss Norreys. 'No, I certainly should not have thought so. Are you sure—it is not one of Winifred's freaks to think so?' she was going to add, but stopped in time.

'Oh, *quite* sure,' said Celia, with the slightest possible inflection of annoyance. 'Winifred is not at all the sort of girl to flirt, or anything like that. And I think it is only natural that he should be devoted to her. She is so clever, and so—unlike the common run, and Lennox has looked up to her all his life. We should all have been so glad, for then she could have settled down at home, or close to home, for good. Len's little place is only two miles away. And it would have kept White Turrets in the family. He is our second-cousin, you know.'

'These arrangements seldom come to pass, however,' said Miss Norreys, philosophically. 'Had that anything to do with Winifred's dislike to staying at home, do you think?'

'Oh dear, no,' said Celia. 'She did not think it a matter of much importance. She has always wanted to take a line of her own; she has always

felt herself cramped by ordinary life. And she wants so to be of real use.'

The two were walking up and down the terrace. For a moment or two Hertha did not speak. Then she said quietly:

'Perhaps I should not discuss the matter with you, dear Celia. You are so much younger than I. But, before I go, I want to have a long talk with your mother. I must tell you that I was completely mistaken about you all. I had no idea whatever that Winifred had such a home, such plain home duties and responsibilities, as I strongly suspect she has. I—I thought you were very poor, and that she had to earn money to help you all.'

Celia grew crimson, and almost gasped for breath. 'Miss Norreys!' she exclaimed. Then she added eagerly, 'Winifred did not mean to mislead you—she is not like that.'

'N—no,' said Hertha. 'I was very indignant at first, but now I don't think she meant anything, except at all costs to get her own way. Of course there was no calculated deceit about it, otherwise she would have found some means of preventing my coming here. But she has placed me myself in a very disagreeable position, as I must make her see. And she must face the consequences.

But I should like to know—you have plenty of sense—do *you* think she is doing right?'

Celia was sorely pressed. Her loyalty to Winifred rose up in arms. But she was taken at a disadvantage: she had always believed that Miss Norreys had warmly aided and abetted Winifred in her search for a career.

'I—I am so surprised,' she said at last. 'I suppose it is best for me to tell you the truth. Yes, at the bottom of my heart I now think—I did not always, but I do now—that she could find plenty to do, and plenty opportunities of being useful to others, here at home. Especially as—you know all that, I suppose? You know that all the property, and it is large, will be *hers*. She is in the position of an eldest son.'

More and more astonished, Miss Norreys felt at a loss for words.

'No, I had no idea of that,' she said. 'That puts her duty beyond all question. I cannot understand her. I feel almost inclined to say I have no patience with her.'

In her excitement she walked on rapidly. They had just, for the second or third time in their stroll, reached the end of the long front terrace, where some steps led down to a straight but more shaded walk, running parallel with one side of the house.

Hertha was beginning to go down the steps, when Celia laid her hand on her arm. Turning in some surprise, Miss Norreys saw that she was paler than usual.

'Not down there, please,' she said. 'I do dislike that walk: it is so gloomy, and—to tell you the truth, that is the path leading up from the old bowling-green, that they say is haunted.'

Hertha could scarcely help laughing. Here, in the broad daylight, it seemed so absurd to be afraid of such things.

'I should, all the same, like to explore it,' she said. 'Now I come to think of it, I don't think I have been down there at all. But of course we won't go that way if you would rather not;' and she good-naturedly turned back.

'I don't generally mind so much,' said Celia, looking rather ashamed. 'But—she, or it, really has been seen lately—they call her "The White Weeper,"' and she instinctively lowered her voice a little. 'I mind it just now, because, you see, it seems so mixed up with Winifred.'

Miss Norreys looked puzzled. 'Mixed up with Winifred?' she repeated, 'how do you mean? What is the story of the White Weeper?'

So Celia related, as she had done to Eric Balderson, the old legend; entering into it in

somewhat fuller detail than to that semi-sceptical person. For, as she went on, she saw that Hertha was not at all inclined to laugh at it; on the contrary, she looked as interested and impressed as could be desired.

'It is strange,' she said, when Celia stopped. 'A curious tradition to have been handed down through so many generations. And I cannot see but that we should sometimes take these things as warnings or guides to a certain extent. Then the reason of Winifred's annoyance, whenever it is mentioned, is that the White Weeper would evidently not approve of *her* present line?'

'Yes,' said Celia. 'And—it does seem distinct. She,' and the girl gave a half-frightened look over her shoulder in the direction of the shady walk, 'she has been seen lately, two or three times. And the people who have seen her were in more than one instance strangers here—and even those who have heard about the ghost don't know the *reason* of her coming. They only think it portends some trouble. But I do think it strange that she should have begun to come so much more since Winifred has been so determined on leaving home.'

'You don't disapprove altogether, at least you *did* not, of her ideas?' said Hertha.

Celia looked unhappy.

'I told you, dear Miss Norreys, that I have changed. I did sympathise more than I do now, and then I feel as if I were disloyal to her. I would rather not say more than that.'

Hertha did not press her.

'You don't think Winifred is at all afraid of the White Weeper?' she said, with a little smile.

'She always mocks at it, but she gets angry too,' said Celia.

'Ah, that shows a latent misgiving somewhere. I am rather glad of it,' Miss Norreys replied.

Then, feeling that she had perhaps said as much as was wise to the girl, who was, after all, the youngest member of the family, she changed the subject.

But that evening she had a long and exhaustive talk with Mrs Maryon, which ended by Winifred's mother feeling that she could never be thankful enough for the chance which had brought them the friendship of the woman she had so misjudged.

'And you prefer to put it all before Winifred yourself, then, my dear Miss Norreys?' said Mrs Maryon at the close of their conversation.

'I think so. I have strong grounds of my own. For, you see, though I do absolve her from any intention of deceiving me, the result to me is the

same as if she had deliberately done so. In fact, it is almost worse—it makes me seem such a foolish person! I shall tell her that the whole *must* be explained to Mr Montague, and, as regards the society, it must be left in his hands. And she will not have the excuse of putting it upon Celia now. I may tell her what we have planned for *her*, may I not?'

'Certainly, most certainly,' said Mrs Maryon. 'There is one comfort,' she went on. 'If Winifred *does* give in, she will do so heartily. There is nothing small about her—no jealousies or resentfulness. If she stays at home or sets to work to do her duty here, she will be thorough about it.'

'Then let us devoutly trust she will,' said Miss Norreys. 'I feel rather hopeful. I am not sure but that at the bottom of her heart she is a little *désillusionnée* about her career. It has not all been smooth sailing.'

But at this Winifred's mother shook her head.

'*That*, I fear, in a nature like hers, would only rouse greater determination—not to use the harsher word, obstinacy,' she said.

But Hertha was sanguine and confident. She felt her own ground sure, and though personally willing enough to sink her own cause of complaint,

she intended to make use of it for the sake of others.

That was to be a day—an evening rather—of explanations. The young people were amusing themselves in the billiard-room after dinner, and Miss Norreys, feeling a little tired, and having no special liking for billiards, was sitting quietly in the drawing-room, thinking over the family complications in which she found herself so unexpectedly involved, when the sound of some one entering the room made her look up. Somewhat to her astonishment, she saw that the new-comer was Lennox Maryon. Still more surprised did she feel when he came forward and drew a chair close to her own.

'Am I intruding?' he said; 'you look nearly as startled as if I were the famous White Weeper herself.' His tone was bantering, but underneath Hertha perceived a touch of nervousness.

'I fancied you were absorbed in your game,' she said. 'No, I did not fancy you were the White Weeper, though I confess I have been thinking about her. But she never comes inside the house?'

'She has never done so up to now,' said Lennox, 'but Heaven knows what desperate steps she may not be driven to take if things go on as they are doing at present.'

His tone was so peculiar that Miss Norreys glanced at him questioningly.

'I hope devoutly she will wait till I have gone, then,' she said, half laughingly. 'I have no wish at all to make her acquaintance. Are you joking, Mr Maryon, or are you at all, just a little, in earnest?'

'Yes and no,' he replied. 'I am half joking out of the excess of my earnestness. Miss Norreys, I have something to tell you—a confession to make. Do you know, sometimes I have fancied you guessed, that I am very seriously, very thoroughly, in love, for the first time in my life?'

'With?' asked Hertha.

'My cousin Louise,' he said, quietly, though his sunburnt face deepened a little in colour.

Hertha nodded her head.

'Yes,' she said, 'I thought so. And—what about Winifred, Mr Maryon?'

'I know the difference now,' he replied. 'That was a case of thinking I was what every one wished me to be. Now—oh, *what* a difference!'

'You should be very grateful to Winifred,' said Hertha, drily.

'I am,' he said, naïvely, '*most* grateful. But'

—and here his honest eyes grew troubled—'it is far from plain sailing. As things are, Louise won't hear of it, and she is a girl of her word. It all depends upon Winifred. Miss Norreys, she is infatuated.'

A full explanation followed. Lennox was clear-headed and entirely candid, and before the conversation was at an end, Hertha saw and understood things more thoroughly than even after her talk with Mrs Maryon.

'I will do what I can,' she said, 'but I feel less confident than I did, somehow. I almost think I could brave a visit from the ghostly guardian of the family, if I thought her influence would carry the day.'

'Hush, my dear Miss Norreys,' said Lennox. 'I admire your devotion, but I tremble. *Supposing* she—it—took you at your word.'

And again Hertha felt uncertain if he were joking or in earnest.

But before she could say more, Celia appeared in the doorway.

'You lazy people!' she said, 'everybody's asking for you. We are going to have a dance in the hall before we go to bed.'

CHAPTER X.

DREAMS AND NO DREAMS.

MISS NORREYS'S mind, though a remarkably well-balanced one, was yet far from phlegmatic or unimpressionable. So far, indeed, from such did she know her inner self to be, that she had learned by experience to beware of her own natural impulsiveness, to have profound belief in 'second thoughts.'

But she was full of quick sympathy, and ever ready to feel keen interest in her surroundings. It is scarcely to be wondered at, therefore, that on the night following the day we have been describing, she went up to her own room greatly engrossed by all she had heard, anxiously eager to prove herself a friend worthy of the name to the various members of the Maryon family who had appealed to her for assistance or advice.

It was a beautiful night. Before Hertha got

into bed she drew back the curtains of one of the two windows—her room was a corner one—as was her custom. For she loved the early morning light, and it never disturbed her slumbers before her usual hour for waking.

A flood of moonlight lay on the terrace beneath. The night was perfectly, peculiarly still, and not a leaf seemed to flutter. There was something curiously dream-like about the whole scene—for the room in which Hertha stood, and on which she threw a glance as she turned again, was, like most of those in the old house, quaint and picturesque in its very simplicity. White panelled and wainscoted, with little wreaths of carved flowers above the lintel of the door and over the two old mirrors sunk in the walls; the bed in a sort of alcove; the ancient fireplace, surmounted by a very high and narrow carved and moulded mantel-piece, of the same dull, *mat*, white-painted wood, which was the chief characteristic of the house, the whole effect was like nothing that Miss Norreys remembered ever to have seen.

'It is very un-English, very un-nineteenth-century, very unlike all the attempted reproductions of the past we have so many of,' thought Hertha. 'It is so exactly what it may have been, and probably was, three or four hundred years

ago. One can realise how the family life has gone on unbrokenly, with all the changing actors in it. generation after generation.'

And again she glanced out. For the first time it struck her that this window overlooked the lower terrace walk which Celia preferred to avoid. With a sudden increase of interest, Hertha pushed up the sash, and leaned out. Yes, that was the very place, the walk bare and open at the end near the house, growing dim and shady as it was lost to view in the shrubberies farther on.

'If it were worth the trouble,' thought Hertha, 'I should like to put on a cloak and go right along to the end and back. I don't think I should be afraid; the moonlight is so bright, and everything is so still. No flopping branches or sighing wind to make one fanciful. Yes, I *think* I should venture. And how proud I should be to tell them of it in the morning.'

But even as she gazed, a slight misgiving seized her. *Was* the night so perfectly still, or was the wind suddenly getting up? Something *was* moving at the far end of the walk—the 'White Weeper's' walk. What? The branch of a tree probably; there were aspens down there, Hertha remembered, and a mere nothing would set *them* quivering.

A slight shiver ran through her—it was growing chilly. With a half-contemptuous smile at herself, she drew down the window, and in a very few moments was safely ensconced in bed, though somewhat shivery still.

'I hope I haven't caught cold through my own folly,' was her last waking thought.

For, notwithstanding her preoccupied mind and a certain amount of excitement, of which she was conscious, Hertha fell asleep quickly, and any one seeing her would have said that her slumbers were sound and untroubled.

But, in point of fact, she was dreaming vividly—all the events of the last few days seemed to be re-enacted before her, with the addition of various fantastic accompaniments such as dreamers know well. Friends and acquaintances she had not thought of for years suddenly appeared as familiar guests among the members of the family at White Turrets. Her own grandmother, whom as a child Hertha had been very fond of, seemed to be there as an ancient châtelaine of the place, pointing out to her, among the visitors, historical personages whom no living being could have known outside a book.

'We are expecting the King—Louis XVI.—of course, and Queen Marie Antoinette, this evening.

They have long wished to visit White Turrets, and now '—— her grandmother was explaining to her, when, with a sudden start, Hertha awoke.

She was not sorry, for though the dream had been of curiously fascinating and fantastic interest, she had been conscious—and the consciousness remained with her even after she was awake—of a strange indescribable fear, that dream fear which, I fancy, at some time or other, every one must have experienced: a fear as of fate, all-pervading and irresistible, of perfectly unspeakable *strangeness*, as if we had got on to another plane of existence altogether, where nothing was as we had ever known it, where we feel ourselves alone in an isolation such as real life has never, even faintly, figured to us. Through all the familiar scenery of her dream—through the sound of her grandmother's voice, and the perfect knowledge that she was here, at White Turrets, among the friends she seemed now to know so well—through the laughter and the smiles she knew to be around her, was this terrible ghastly consciousness of *fear*. And it did not at once disappear when she awoke. It seemed still to be clinging to her, haunting the air round about her. Never had Hertha suffered in the same way to such an extent.

'What can be the matter with me?' she said to herself. 'I feel poisoned with fear. Dear me, if this sort of thing is the kind of sensation one has in a haunted room, Heaven preserve me from such an experience! But *can* there be anything uncanny in this room? I have never felt it before. Oh no, it must all be fancy and nonsense. My nerves are upset, I suppose. I have been taking my friends' troubles too much to heart.'

But she could not get to sleep again. Indeed, she felt almost afraid of doing so for fear of a repetition of her dream terrors. They grew fainter after a while, but she became increasingly wakeful. And at last she got out of bed, and throwing her dressing-gown round her, she went towards the window, of which the blind was drawn up.

It was the same window where she had sat looking out on the moonlight late the night before. Why did she go back there? Afterwards she could not tell. It seemed as if some invisible power had drawn her thither, and for the moment she had forgotten the slight shiver she had felt at believing she saw something moving in the shrubbery. But no sooner was she seated again at her old post than the remembrance returned to her; she would have liked to move away, but a

sort of fascination, partly curiosity, partly a feeling she could not describe, retained her.

The moonlight was much less brilliant now. There seemed a slight haze, scarcely amounting to clouds, over the sky. But the night—for dawn was still some way off—was very calm, and there was no wind at all.

'There is literally *nothing* moving,' thought Hertha. 'The stillness almost frightens me. How quite absurdly fanciful I am becoming!' and, as if in a kind of anticipation of something, she knew not what, she held her breath in an intensity of listening. Then came over her the feeling of being no longer under her own control. She could not have moved had she wished to do so. But she did not wish it. With this new sensation her fears had all disappeared.

It came—the something she was watching for. Far off, at the extreme end of the walk already described, a faint flutter, between light and shadow —a *movement*—grew perceptible. A presence of some kind was there. It came on and on, slowly but steadily, and the moon came out again more clearly, its rays reflected on the vaguely defined figure, of which the most Hertha could for some moments have said was that it moved, and that it was white.

She sat as if turned to stone, yet she was no longer afraid. Not even when, by degrees, she became aware that the form was undoubtedly that of a woman—a woman, young, graceful, but in dire distress, for as it advanced, with its slow, cadenced step, till within a few yards of the terrace just below her, she saw it lift its pallid arms in their shadowy white drapery, as if in piteous appeal, then wringing its hands, for one fleeting moment its face was raised to her as if her presence were known and realised, and she saw that it was that of a beautiful woman, weeping, weeping sorely, as if her very heart would break, for woe she was powerless to avert.

And a whisper ran through Hertha's overwrought brain: 'It is she—the White Weeper—she is appealing to *me*.'

But there was no sound, only the intense gaze of the exquisite though death-like and mournful face—and while she felt those eyes upon her, Hertha could have felt nothing beside.

Then they withdrew. Something made her at last able to close her own, and she half fell back on her chair. And when she looked again there was nothing—nothing whatever but the trees and the garden in the moonlight, utterly still, as if in an enchanted sleep.

And Hertha went back to bed, and fell almost at once into sound and perfectly dreamless slumber.

She woke at her usual hour, to sunshine and the sound of the birds' joyous carolling this time. She lay still, thinking deeply, as she went over in her mind the strange experiences of the night. The question—'Was it all a dream?'—never for one moment occurred to her. Neither then nor at any future time did any doubt of the objective reality of what she had seen shake the intensity of the impression that had been made upon her.

Yet the *fear* was all gone—in fact, ever since she had thrown off the nightmare-like oppression of her fantastic dream, it had been no longer there. She felt no reluctance to stay on at White Turrets, no repulsion to the room, no shrinking even from the long terrace walk, up and down which had paced those ghostly steps—the pitiful, shadowy form of the White Weeper. But still there was much for Hertha to consider. Why had the weird family guardian appeared to *her?*

'She may be there every night—always, for aught I know,' thought Miss Norreys, 'but why were *my* eyes opened to perceive her? Why did she appeal to *me,* as I feel convinced she did? Why not to self-willed Winifred, the cause of all

the trouble and anxiety? Possibly she could not: perhaps Winifred is so constituted that no spirit could make its presence known to her. It must be that, I suppose. But what can I do? Winifred must know by this time that I do not sympathise with her mania for "a career," and that she has involved me in her folly in a far from pleasant way. However, I suppose I must speak to her more plainly and strongly than I have done—that is the only response I can make to you, poor troubled spirit!'

And before she began to dress she stood for a moment at the window, gazing along the path, now gleaming and brilliant in the clear morning sunshine, and while she did so, a sudden idea struck her. She would tell, in the first place at least, *no one*, except Winifred, of what she had seen.

'It shall be a confidence between her and me,' she decided, 'and as such it may impress her the more—far more than if I told them all, and she heard every one cross-questioning me about it.' And no sooner had she thus resolved than she was conscious of a curious sensation of satisfaction, as if for the first time she had fully grasped the nature of the commission entrusted to her to perform.

She did not look quite like herself that morn-

ing when she went down-stairs. Her beautiful eyes were less clear and open; she seemed tired and slightly preoccupied, though she did her best to hide any signs of disturbance.

But Mrs Maryon and her two younger daughters were keen sighted, much more so than Winifred, and Hertha was assailed with affectionate inquiries as to whether she had a headache, or had she not slept well, &c., which she parried as best she could.

There were two or three letters for her—one, a large, rather thick one, in Mr Montague's handwriting, she looked at irresolutely, then put it into her pocket unopened.

'It must be in reply to the long letter I sent him two days after I got here,' she said to herself. 'I am glad he is back in England, but I think I would rather *not* know what he says till after I have spoken to Winifred.'

A special and uninterrupted talk with one member of a fairly large party, even if that party be a family one, is not always easy to achieve unobserved, though in a country-house it would seem a simple enough matter. But of late Winifred had rather avoided than sought Miss Norreys's society. Some idea of the possible causes of complaint Hertha might believe herself

to have against her for the conduct which Winifred was beginning to realise as not being, in appearance at least, candid, made the girl less at ease than heretofore in her friend's society. She did not as yet allow this to herself: she would not own, even in thought, that she had been to blame. She 'put it all down' to this visit of Miss Norreys to White Turrets, where, though on one side the favourable impression her friend had made on Mrs Maryon and the others was gratifying to Winifred, on the other it was somewhat irritating.

'I must wait till we are back in London again,' she said to herself. 'Of course she *must* be civil and pleasant to them all, and they certainly have been very kind and nice. But she is more impressionable than I thought her. Seeing things here as she has done, I am afraid she will never sympathise thoroughly in the monotony and dullness of this narrow home-life. Still, after all, it can't be helped. I must do without sympathy, I suppose. But—I do wish it had never come into mother's head to invite Hertha down here.'

She was standing by herself in front of one of the windows of a long corridor, on to which opened several of the principal rooms on the first floor, when these reflections crossed her mind. This window overlooked the entrance to the walk

so carefully eschewed by Celia—though not so much of it could be seen as from Miss Norreys's room, situated in an angle of the house.

The association of the White Weeper's reputed preference for this walk was always an irritation to Winifred, as was, in fact, everything real or imaginary which had to do with the old story.

She gave herself a little shake when she took in whither her gaze was absently directed.

'Ridiculous nonsense!' she half murmured, as she turned to go, and why she should have started violently, as at that moment a hand was laid upon her shoulder, she could not have told. It was not the sign of a guilty conscience, for, in all good faith, Winifred as yet had barely taken in that she had been at all to blame. 'Misunderstood,' 'narrowly judged,' she had told herself she had been, and she allowed that to others her conduct might have *seemed* disingenuous. But she was essentially honest, and it is sometimes as difficult for naturally candid persons to take in that they have put themselves into a crooked position, as for a crafty and calculating character to believe in straightforwardness in itself or others.

Still she started. And she was assuredly not nervous.

It was Hertha's face she looked up into as she

turned: Hertha's eyes, searching — and what more? Was it reproach or anxiety, or a mingling of both, that Winifred read in their clear depths? And in spite of herself the girl looked away, while her colour deepened a little.

'Did I startle you?' said Miss Norreys. 'I am sorry, but—I wanted to speak to you quietly. I have been looking for you.'

'I am only too ready and delighted to have a chance of you,' said Winifred, trying to carry the war into the enemy's country. 'But you know I scarcely see you; mamma and the others monopolise you so.'

There was a touch of truth in the reproach, but Hertha did not feel guilty. She had avoided *tête-à-tête* conversation with Winifred out of consideration for the girl herself as much as for others.

'It is true that I have not sought for opportunities of being alone with you,' she said. 'I am now quite ready to explain why, though I think you must have some idea of what I felt.'

Winifred did not at once reply. She was again staring out of the window, and again a feeling of irritation came over her. Did *every* side of the house look out on that detestable lower terrace?

'I am quite ready for as long a talk as you like,' she said. 'I daresay you have felt a little

shaken in me, but—I think I can make you understand me.'

And she looked up in Hertha's face so frankly, that again—and she was glad of it—the conviction of Winifred's honesty of intention and absence of cunning or calculation returned to Miss Norreys almost as at first.

'Shall we go out for our talk?' Hertha said. 'It is a lovely fresh morning, and I have just a little—headache of a kind. At least, I did not sleep well.'

'No, I remember: you did not look like yourself when you came down to breakfast,' said Winifred, with sudden compunction. 'And I am keeping you standing about. Are you sure it won't tire you? After all, we shall have plenty of time for talking in the future, I hope.'

Hertha shook her head.

'I don't want to put it off,' she said. 'Indeed, I cannot. If there were no other reason, you know how seldom I have a free half-day even at home. And there are other reasons. Can you get your hat? The air will do me good. I will wait for you by the sun-dial,' and she moved away as she spoke.

'I will be with you in two minutes,' said Winifred.

CHAPTER XI.

A VICTORY.

THE sun-dial stood on the grass in front of, though at some little distance from, the principal entrance. For at White Turrets the ground immediately round the house was too much intersected by terraces, and on too many levels, to have any great unbroken expanse of lawn. And there, as she had said, Hertha was standing when, a few minutes later, Winifred joined her.

Even Miss Maryon's short-sighted eyes were struck by her friend's general look and bearing. Hertha was leaning against the old stone, in a tired attitude. She was pale, too, and as Winifred drew near she gave a slight shiver.

'Are you cold?' said the girl anxiously. 'If you are, we can go indoors again at once.'

'No, thank you, I am not really cold,' Miss Norreys replied; 'it is only the creeping-together

feeling one has after a bad night. When I did fall asleep, I slept, I think, *too* heavily. I daresay it is a sort of nervousness. The air and moving about will do me good.'

She turned as she spoke, and followed by Winifred, walked quickly towards the side of the house.

'It is nicest on the terraces,' she said; 'we can walk up and down, and talk quite undisturbed, and always find a seat if we want one.'

'Ye-es,' said Winifred, lagging a little. 'But would you mind coming round to the other side? it is so much more cheerful and sunny.'

She was unusually deferential and subdued.

'No,' said Hertha, with a touch of obstinacy, 'I like the shady side best; I am not cold now. That walk with the aspens at the farther end is charming. And the others don't like it—it is the haunted walk, isn't it? So I may as well enjoy it while with you, who don't mind nonsense of that kind.'

'But I do mind it, though in a different way,' said Winifred; 'it irritates me more than I can express. I really can hardly tell you how I detest any allusion to that old story.'

'Really?' said Hertha, airily. 'I think you should be above such feelings. It is inconsistent

with your—well—your attitude to things in general. Here we are—let us show our defiance of such old wives' tales by marching boldly up and down in the White Weeper's own hunting-ground while we have our talk out.'

Winifred laughed a little, but constrainedly. Matter-of-fact as she was, she did not quite understand her friend this morning.

'Of course, I don't *really* mind,' she said, 'if you truly like this side best. And now will you tell me exactly what you have been vexed with me for, and in what way you have come to think less well of me than you used to do?'

Hertha felt somewhat surprised. After all, Winifred was not so dense as appeared. And 'to be quite fair on her,' thought Miss Norreys, 'she *might* have resented my changing to her without giving her my reasons and a chance of justifying herself to some extent.'

This reflection came at a good moment. It softened her tone to Winifred.

'Yes,' she said, 'I will be entirely frank with you, and put before you the whole story of our acquaintance, and what I did to help you, from my point of view, which is likely, I much fear, to be that of others; and I certainly will not exaggerate things. For'—and here a generous

impulse made her add warmly—'I *do* trust you, Winifred. I trust your good intentions and your honesty of purpose, though I believe you deceive yourself; and self-deception is terribly insidious.'

She paused a moment, but the girl did not speak. Hertha glanced round her as if to gather strength and breath for what she had to say. How fair and charming a prospect it was! There was something almost *unreal* in the vivid clearness of the spring beauty all about—unreconcilable with the troubles and anxieties which yet one knew must be there behind it all.

But as Hertha's gaze wandered farther, over to where, on the other side of some rising ground, the old church spire rose up into the blue, and the lazily curling smoke of the surrounding homesteads told of the human lives and interests close at hand, different thoughts arose in her mind. What infatuation was over the girl, or woman, beside her? Who could desire a more distinct field of usefulness than Winifred Maryon was deliberately rejecting? The awful problems relating to the poor of our overcrowded great cities must not be shirked by such as are wise enough to grasp them, but how thankful should be those whose duties in smaller spheres are clear and

defined, lying among more normal conditions and along less conflicting paths!

She turned to her companion abruptly.

'Winifred, my dear child—my dear friend, if you don't like to be called a child—I *wish* I understood you; that is at the root of it all. I *cannot* get at your motives, your way of looking at things.'

Winifred looked up—a frown, not of annoyance but of perplexity, lining her usually unruffled forehead; her blue eyes fixed on Hertha's face with a touch of appeal which was almost piteous.

'Tell me,' she said, 'tell me everything; I do want to know.'

And Miss Norreys did as she asked. She went back to the beginning of their acquaintance, and told her all, as it had affected her herself, as it had taken shape and colour, from her point of view. She spoke as simply as she could, and tried her best to be practical and matter-of-fact. For talking to Winifred was not like talking to Celia, who, young as she was, could take in the sense of a sentence before it was half expressed, who felt the *spirit* underlying and surrounding even the 'commonest' commonplaces of life.

Winifred did not interrupt her. Now and then her colour rose a little; once or twice, as Hertha

was not sorry to see, she winced, and seemed on the point of bursting out with some exclamation. And then, when Miss Norreys had come to the end of the first part of her story and stopped, the girl looked up.

'Yes,' she said, 'I see how it must have looked to you, and I see, as I certainly did not before, that I was *not* perfectly ingenuous. To a certain extent I deceived you; at least, I allowed circumstances to deceive you and others, and I was glad of it, because it suited my purpose. But remember I did not start with any intention of deceiving you, and I thought I had a right to take advantage of the mistake when it arose; because, from *my* point of view, if my work was worth paying for, I had a right to the payment, don't you see?' and she looked up anxiously.

'Perhaps so, but you had no right to the *position*, which alone made your earning payment possible. At least, you have no right to obtain it without explaining your circumstances,' said Hertha.

Winifred was silent.

'And,' Hertha went on, though sorry for the mortification she felt that her words must cause, 'to tell the truth, I don't think your work has been exactly worth paying for till now. Every-

thing requires an apprenticeship; part of the idea of this society is to give girls who need to earn their livelihood a chance of fitting themselves to do so, by giving them the necessary apprenticeship gratis, and, more than that, by paying them from the first.'

Winifred grew crimson.

'I never thought of that,' she said. 'I am perfectly ready, indeed I would much rather pay back what they have given me up to this. For I believe my work *is*, or will be from now, worth paying for.'

'Very likely,' said Hertha, but then she went on to lay the situation in two aspects before Winifred—her own clear home duties, so peculiar and unmistakable; and the wrong of taking advantage of the society to the prejudice of some other girl in real need of it.

The first of these Winifred began by disposing of glibly enough. The work of home was better done by Louise than by herself—better, well, not literally better—she knew she had a clearer head for figures, and a more ready grasp of things than her sister. But she was not nearly so patient and sweet tempered as Louise, she decided complacently: 'Oh no, not nearly. I should try papa awfully.'

Hertha stared at her.

'And you would make your own shortcomings an excuse for neglecting duties?' she exclaimed. 'What sophistry! What a vicious circle you are involving yourself in! Patience and self-control can be acquired. You speak as if your besetting sins belonged to you, like the colour of your eyes or the shape of your nose.'

Winifred did not reply.

'And my second point—that of taking what is not meant for you?' Hertha went on.

'That,' said Winifred, 'is, I think, for the society to decide. Of course I am now quite ready to tell anything about my circumstances.'

In her turn Hertha was silent. She agreed with Winifred that the society should decide, and she felt considerably inclined to believe that the society *had* decided. For Mr Montague's thick letter, though unopened, was in her pocket.

But the conversation was by no means at an end.

'Winifred,' said Miss Norreys again, 'I have a great deal more to say to you—to tell you. But it would be such a satisfaction to me, and what matters infinitely more, to yourself afterwards, always—if you could now, without any further reason, try to see where your real duties lie.'

'I *will* try,' said Winifred, 'but,' and at last the

tears rose in her eyes, 'I did so long for a wider, a fuller life.'

'You cannot have found the petty detail and often wearisome round of work at —— Street very widening or inspiriting surely.'

'No, but I thought that would come. I was beginning to feel that something *depended* on me, that I had a post—a place. And I like the feeling of "London,"' she added naïvely.

Hertha smiled.

'Yes,' she said, 'I know that, and you may still have it. I think you should be more in London than you have been.'

'There is Celia, too,' exclaimed Winifred.

'I am not forgetting her. But about yourself —you have put it in words. It is *the sense of responsibility* about home duties that has been wanting, and has made them unattractive and irksome. That will come, if you set your shoulder to the wheel. You will soon see that, as I do believe is the case, you will be able to do the work better than it has ever been done, and new developments and possibilities would open out. Why, with the experience you have acquired, you might work into the society's hands down here—you might have a convalescent home, or a children's holiday home.'

Winifred's melancholy face brightened a little.

'I will think about it all,' she repeated, 'and I will write anything you like to the society, or —but I hate troubling you—would not the best thing be for you to write to Mr Montague? And now, have you told me everything?'

'No,' said Hertha. They were now approaching the end where the aspens stood. Hitherto in their pacing up and down they had not gone so far, but this time Miss Norreys had purposely prolonged their walk a little. 'No,' she said, stopping short and looking round her with a strange kind of curiosity, 'I have something more to tell you—where does this path go to, or end, Winifred?' she broke off suddenly.

'Oh, I don't know exactly. We never come this way,' the girl replied impatiently. 'It goes along among the aspens, and then gets into a tangle. And some way further on there's a brook that runs into a pond. It's a wilderness sort of a place, and I hate it.'

Hertha looked at her.

'Winifred,' she said, 'you have a sort of belief in the White Weeper story, otherwise you wouldn't be so cross about it.'

'I have not, I have not indeed,' said Winifred earnestly. 'But I don't deny that the association

is painful. It is said to have been down here near the pond that the unfortunate woman spent her last night at home before her husband drove her by his cruelty to take refuge in the convent at Cruxfield, where she died. And there is always a creepy, shivery feeling about here; the rest of the place is so open and bright.'

She could not repress a slight shudder as she spoke.

'Do come away,' she added.

'Not just for a moment. I want to tell you something here—on the very spot, from where—no, I will begin at the beginning,' said Miss Norreys.

And in a few minutes Winifred was in possession of the whole details of Hertha's night's experience.

She grew very pale, but listened without a word or gesture of interruption, till the end. Then she burst out:

'Oh, surely, surely,' she exclaimed, 'it was a dream. It must have been.'

But Hertha shook her head.

'No,' she said, 'it was no dream—nothing in the least resembling what we are accustomed to call dreams. A vision it may have been. Perhaps all ghostly visitations are visions. But I was

awake when I saw it. I remember her face perfectly. If I were an artist I could paint it.'

'And it has impressed you very much?' said Winifred.

'Naturally.'

'And you have told no one but me?—thank you for that. It was good of you, for—of course they would associate it with *me*, with my being here.'

'They could scarcely do otherwise,' said Hertha, drily.

'It is strange,' said Winifred, as if thinking aloud. 'Why, if such things are, why did she not appear to *me?*'

'Perhaps she cannot. Perhaps you are one who could not be made conscious of such a presence,' said Hertha. 'Perhaps'—— But here she stopped, though with a little smile.

'Go on, do,' said Winifred.

'I was only going to say—don't think me irreverent, but you are not easily "convinced against your will," Winifred. The verse about "Moses and the prophets" came into my mind. I am not sure that you would give more heed to a ghost than to those who have already spoken.'

'Not as much,' said Winifred. 'But what,

then, has been the use of the poor White Weeper's troubling herself and you about me?'

'To strengthen *my* hands, perhaps—in my prophetic capacity, to increase my conviction.'

'And what is that?'

'A very strong one—that harm will come of your persistence. Increased trouble and sorrow to others it will certainly cause. Listen, Winifred.'

And then she fired her last shot, by revealing to the girl Lennox Maryon's confidence of the previous evening.

Winifred was not pale now. Her cheeks burned, her face grew crimson to the very roots of her hair.

'*Louise!*' she repeated, '*Louise!*'

Hertha felt rather provoked.

'Yes,' she said, '*Louise.* Your cousin is heart and soul devoted to her, and what wonder? She is charming and good, and often I almost think her beautiful. You have always underestimated her.'

'Then,' said Winifred, without directly replying, 'I suppose he never *really* cared for me.'

'I am inclined to think he never did,' said Hertha. 'But surely you should be very glad if it be so? You never cared for him.'

'No,' said Winifred, 'never. But'—and a curious expression came into her face—'I suppose it is very contemptible, but it may be a sort of horrid mortification. I don't know how I feel about it. And yet—oh yes, I do love Louise, and I know she is an angel of goodness, and I'm very fond of Len, in his way. I love them all, but—I'm beginning to see it so plainly. None of them love me. I am out of it all—why was I the eldest? Why can't I go away and make my own way as I planned?'

They were near a bench. Winifred flung herself upon it and burst into uncontrollable girlish sobs. She seemed to Hertha to have grown ten years younger, and never had Miss Norreys' heart gone out to her so much as now.

For a minute or two she let her cry undisturbed, then she said very gently:

'My dear child, I think I understand you and the whole story. You have not sought their love in the past as you might have done, but you have it. You do not know how much they all love you. And—you are *very* fortunate—see how duty and affection are pointing the same way in your case. You have it now in your power to win love and gratitude such as fall to the lot of few, by simply doing right.'

'If it is right and done for that reason, I don't deserve gratitude,' said Winifred, dejectedly.

'*They* will think so, anyway. And it will be a sacrifice of your own wishes to those of others. That should and will bring gratitude.'

Winifred sighed deeply.

'I will do it then,' she said, 'and once I say a thing, I don't go back from it. I will give it up. But please leave me alone about it for to-day. I will keep out of the way till I am all right again.'

They were not far from the house by this time.

'I will run in by one of the side doors, and get to my own room,' Winifred went on. 'Will you forgive my leaving you here—and—and I want to thank you, but I don't quite know how I feel.'

'Never mind about *me*. It is all right as far as I am concerned. I am very thankful,' said Hertha.

Winifred was turning away when another thought struck her.

'About Celia,' she said. 'I did—unselfishly, I think—I did want to help her,' and the choke in her voice touched Hertha again.

'I know you did, and rightly, and you may take comfort in the thought that it will, after all, have been through you that Celia is to have the opportunities she needs. She is to come to me, to live

with me for a time, till, as she expresses it, she can "test" herself. That is to say, dear Winifred, she can *now* do so. Had you held out, she would never have consented to leave home.'

Through Winifred's flushed and tear-stained face her blue eyes looked up at Hertha with perplexity.

'I don't think I yet quite understand your point of view,' she said. 'Tell me, is it because you think Celia has special gifts, or that I have special calls, that you advise us so differently?'

'Both,' Miss Norreys replied.

'But supposing I had had her gifts as well as my calls, what then?'

Hertha hesitated.

'I cannot really say,' she replied. 'It would have been more difficult to decide. At least, it *seems* as if it would have been so. But imaginary positions are not what we have to deal with. And when there are what appear to be almost equally balanced claims upon us, as *sometimes*, though not often, occurs, well, perhaps in such a case it does not matter so very much, in the highest sense of all, *which* path we take if we do it heartily and conscientiously. You would not have been left in doubt long, I feel sure, if such had been your case.'

'And it is *not*, so we need not trouble about it,' said Winifred, practically. 'But one thing more, as we have come upon this. Do you think all girls who are not literally forced to earn their bread should stay at home and lead the old routine humdrum lives—I mean, of course, those who have no great or special gifts? Have you no sympathy with all the feeling of the day about women?'

'The very greatest and deepest,' said Hertha. 'But it is an immense subject, and cannot be treated in wholesale fashion. Individual lives differ so tremendously. All I can say about it roughly is that love of excitement and change and novelty should not be mistaken for real, deliberate desire to make the best and the most of the powers we have. And it should never be forgotten that "home" is the place we are born into—in a very special sense woman's own kingdom. Outside interests should radiate from and revolve round home—that is the ideal. When home *has* to be given up, it should be done regretfully, as a sad necessity, whereas the wish to escape from it is, I fear, in many cases nowadays, the great motive.'

'But girls are not alone to blame for that,' said Winifred. 'Think what some parents are: tyran-

nical and selfish, scarcely allowing a daughter to have a mind or a soul of her own.'

'I know that some are like that,' said Hertha. 'If a girl does not marry, she is treated as if she had no right to have a self at all! But, where parents are reasonable, I doubt if any home life *need* be narrow and stifling, and all the rest of it. Monotony is not necessarily an evil. There is immense monotony in all good work, at least in the qualifying one's self for it. I think what makes home life so trying and unsatisfying to so many unmarried women is the want of the sense of responsibility, the not feeling that it really matters, except for themselves, whether they are idle and frivolous or not. It is that sense of responsibility which makes even a dull, commonplace, *married* life attractive. The wife feels herself *somebody*, a centre.'

'Yes, I am sure it must be,' said Winifred. 'But how is it all to be set right? There are so many girls who can't marry nowadays, they say.'

'Well, they must bear it. Cheerful acceptance of evils, irremediable for *us*, though in the long run they may be set right again, is, after all, a *very* big part of our life's work, is it not? And as to actual, practical work, "usefulness" in the noblest

sense, I have great faith in its coming to those who take at once whatever comes in their way. It is like capital. Money makes money, we are told. Well, I believe that doing work brings work to do. But I did not mean to preach like this.'

'I am glad of it. I will think about it,' said Winifred, gently.

Then she turned away towards the house, walking slowly, however, for she felt weak and faint from the violent weeping so rare to her. And the sun had been beating on her head more than she realised. Like many English people, Winifred did not know the danger of the spring sun—altogether she felt strangely unlike herself.

And Hertha did not keep her in sight, for she herself moved towards the front in search of a shady spot, where she might read Mr Montague's letter undisturbed.

CHAPTER XII.

AFTER ALL THESE YEARS.

MISS NORREYS found the sheltered corner she was in search of, and then she read her letter. It was a very long one, full of interest to her for reasons besides those affecting Winifred. And more than an hour had passed before, at last recalling herself to the present, she rose from her seat to return to the house.

'How perfectly beautiful it is!' she thought. 'This place is almost too sunshiny, so far as I have seen it. I should like to know it in winter, or in cloudy weather; I wonder if the "White cat's palace" feeling could still remain, or if it would seem more commonplace and homely.'

'Homely,' in the sweetest sense of the word, it always was, however. As Hertha went slowly in, crossing the white-panelled entrance hall, and down one or two of the long passages, on a rather

roundabout route to her quarters—for she now knew the house well, and felt a fascination in strolling about it—she passed one or two open doors, revealing glimpses of 'interiors' which carried her in fancy back by a century or two. There was the still-room as it might have been in the days of the great-great-grandmothers of the present inhabitants; the white-shelved 'napery' room with its snowy piles, which one knew by instinct must be lavender-scented; even the girls' own sitting-room, which she passed on one of the first-floor landings, in spite of the very nineteenth-century piano and easel and wealth of books and book-cases, might, at the first rapid glance, have been the legendary tabby-lady's own boudoir, with its lattice-paned windows and polished floor.

'It is like no other place in the world,' said Hertha to herself for the twentieth time. 'I only wish I could give to poor Winifred some of the quite indescribable charm it has for me. I suppose it is just that she has grown up in it; but yet Celia, and even Louise, feel it almost as I do. Well, Winifred may awake in many ways yet. She will probably love her home better when there is no stifled consciousness of self-reproach mixed up with it. How glad I am she gave in

before she—or I—knew the contents of Mr Montague's letter. I must answer it at once, by the bye.'

She was standing in the corridor out of which her own room opened, leaning idly against the balusters here surrounding a sort of gallery overlooking the inner hall below, admiring the charming effects of the morning sunshine creeping in at the capriciously placed windows of this part of the house, lighting up the brasses of the great 'dog fireplace,' and flecking the well-worn crimson carpet of the shallow-stepped staircase—a perfect picture of somewhat slumbrous peacefulness. All at once, through the morning quiet and stillness, re-echoing up and down from no direction that she could at once define, came a piercing scream—a scream so utterly at variance with everything around, that the startling terror of it was doubled in intensity.

Hertha looked about her, horror-stricken. Then realising that the sound had entirely died away, she began to collect herself a little, to hope that it was some trick or folly among the servants, and she was hurrying to the stairs, when again broke out the cry; this time, however, accompanied by wild confused words and the sound of hurrying footsteps. They were hurrying towards her, and

in another moment Miss Norreys recognised the voice as Celia's.

'Oh, come, come quickly,' she was calling. 'She is dead! I am sure she is dead!'

'Celia,' said Hertha, as the girl came flying along wildly, 'what *is* the matter?'

For all answer Celia caught her by the arm and dragged her backwards again—across the hall, for by this time Hertha had got to the foot of the staircase—down a side passage to a door leading out to the grounds. And there, just below the few steps leading from the terrace, for even here there were terraces to descend from as in the front, lay the cause of Celia's agonised screams.

It was Winifred, white and unconscious, very, very white, with the half-closed, unseeing eyes, that make the dearest and best known face look strange and dreadful.

'Is she dead?' gasped Celia, who was almost as white as her sister.

Hertha had stooped down beside poor Winifred, bending very closely over her.

'Dead!' she repeated, looking up, 'of course not. My dear Celia, you must have more self-control.'

The rather cold, seemingly unsympathising words brought the young girl more quickly to

It was Winifred, white and unconscious.

herself than anything else could have done, which was Hertha's intention, though, in truth, at the first moment she had been nearly as terrified as Celia.

'Of course not. She has only fainted. Run and fetch Mrs Grimthorp—and water—and then, perhaps, Louise. Yes, Louise, tell her quietly, so as not to startle her too.'

Somewhat hurt, but inexpressibly relieved, Celia rushed off. And in a few minutes the crowd of anxious faces and ready hands was only too great. Miss Norreys dismissed them all, while she and the housekeeper set to work to bring Winifred round again. After a while they succeeded: she shivered and opened her eyes, smiled faintly at Hertha, mentioning something about her head, then seemed to relapse into semi-consciousness again.

'It is more than a common faint,' said Hertha, regretfully. 'I fear it may have been something of a sunstroke. Poor child, I hope I was not too hard upon her,' she added to herself.

Winifred had to be carried into the house, to a bedroom, for there were several such at White Turrets, on the ground floor; the doctor sent for, and worst of all, her father and mother told of the catastrophe, a shock which Hertha and Louise would gladly have spared them had it been pos-

sible. And for a few hours there was some serious anxiety. But it gradually dispersed. Hertha's idea had been correct: it was a mild case of sunstroke, aggravated, no doubt, by the unusual agitation and emotion that Winifred had gone through that same morning.

By the third day she was much better, though not yet well enough to leave her room. And this was the day on which she was to have returned to London with her friend.

'It is rather too bad—don't you think so?' she said to Hertha, 'that when I *had* given in I should be tied by the leg like this, literally'—for in her fall one ankle had been sprained. 'It seems to take away all the—the credit of it, as it were,' she went on, with a rueful smile.

'No, dear, it does not. They all know—your parents and your sisters, and,' with a glance round to make sure that no one could hear, 'your cousin. They all know what you had resolved, and as soon as you are well enough to talk more you will see what they feel about it,' Hertha replied.

A gleam of bright pleasure crossed Winifred's pale face.

'Still,' she said, 'does it not a little destroy your faith in our guardian ghost, as you choose to

consider her? If I had been standing out about it, determined not to give in, she might have tried something of the kind, but as I had given in'——

Her tone puzzled Miss Norreys.

'You don't mean to say that the White Weeper had anything to do with your fainting-fit—your fall?' she said.

'N—no,' replied Winifred. 'But if she is really so concerned about us all, about me in particular, she might have prevented it somehow, don't you think?'

Her tone of matter-of-fact discussion of the subject was almost amusing. Winifred would always be Winifred!

'As things have turned out, I scarcely see that the catastrophe affects you or the whole question very much one way or the other,' said Miss Norreys, 'except that—Winifred, it must show you how mistaken you have been in thinking you are not deeply cared for and loved.'

'Yes,' said Winifred, flushing a little, 'it may have been to show me that.' Then, after a little pause: 'Practically, it only affects me in this way, that I had made up my mind to go back to London with you to do my work for a week or two—for nothing, of course,' and here she grew still more flushed, 'till they replace me. And I wanted to

collect my things and to say good-bye to two or three people—the people where I lodged, amongst them. I have been so interested in them—in the two poor daughters; the father and mother are dreadful people, very often intoxicated,' she added calmly.

'My dear Winifred! And the society recommended such a place for a young girl to live at?' exclaimed Hertha, aghast.

'Oh dear no, I found it out for myself. And I am not a young girl. I was able to be of great use to them. But for me there would have been an execution in the house ever so long ago.'

And then some allusion in Mr Montague's letter—which, in her newborn anxiety to spare Winifred further mortification, Hertha had determined she should never see, recurred to Miss Norreys's mind. 'It appears she has even set the society's rules at defiance with regard to her lodgings.' She understood the sentence now.

'I can do any commissions that need to be done for you. I have arranged now to stay till the day after to-morrow, and you will be able to tell me all by then,' she said quietly, thinking in her own mind that it was probably very well that Winifred was not to return to her self-chosen quarters at all. 'The White Weeper must have

been very wise not to have prevented the accident, even supposing she could have done so,' she thought to herself, while half laughing at her own fancifulness. But the idea suggested a question.

'What did make you fall, I wonder?' she said. 'Do you think you fainted first, or that the shock of the fall made you faint?'

'I don't know,' said Winifred. 'It was very strange. I was dizzy—that was the sunstroke, I suppose. But I might have had a slight sunstroke without either falling or fainting. I have never fainted before, so I don't know anything about it. But it was very strange. I felt dizzy, as I said, and I was going up the terrace steps—it was *the* terrace, you know, that runs on to the aspens—when all at once I became icy cold, not cold in myself, but as if something outside me, something coming *to* me, had made me cold. It was so startling, so extraordinary, that the shock seemed to paralyse me—I felt myself going, and then I must have fallen. The next thing I remember is your face looking at me.'

'It is strange,' said Hertha, 'but I do not know much about fainting either.'

'You see,' said Winifred, naïvely, 'I don't think in all my life before I had ever cried so violently, or—or felt so—so unlike myself.'

'No,' agreed Hertha. And in her own mind she said that there are certainly 'more things' close about us than we dream of. Who could say if the awakening of Winifred's finer and more perceptive nature might not have begun?

Two days later, Miss Norreys found herself in the train on her return journey to London. She was alone this time—she could scarcely believe that barely ten days had passed since the exquisite spring morning when she and Winifred travelled down together to the home Hertha had pictured to herself as so modest, if not humble, an abode. And even now she could not repress a smile at the thought of her own astonishment at the first sight of White Turrets, and her indignation against Winifred.

How much seemed to have happened in those few days! It had been to Hertha like the reading of a very interesting book, in which, for the time, her own life and thoughts had been merged.

'And not even the ghost story wanting, which is to be found in every orthodox novel nowadays,' she thought. 'But I am not at the end of my story of real life yet. I have to prepare for pretty Celia coming to me next month, and to settle up Winifred's small affairs. I am sorry for her accident, poor child, but very glad she is not coming

up to London just now. It would have been almost impossible to conceal from her the real state of the case.'

For Mr Montague's letter—the letter which Hertha had refrained from reading before her talk with Winifred—had contained matter which would have been sorely mortifying to the heiress of White Turrets. The society among whose workers she had for a short time been enrolled had decided on dismissing her, feeling naturally indignant at the deception which its heads considered had been put upon them. Mr Montague was, of course, exonerated from all intentional collusion, but his position in the matter was unpleasant, and but for his firm and steady regard for Hertha, he might have visited on her some of his annoyance.

'Nor could I have resented it if he had done so,' thought Miss Norreys.

But Mr Montague had behaved well and unselfishly. All he could do he had done, and that had been to obtain a promise that if Miss Maryon at once sent in her resignation it would be accepted in lieu of a dismissal.

'They are by no means sorry to be free of her,' he wrote, 'for though a clever girl in several ways, her self-will and defiance of authority were impossible to stand, coupled as they were with

complete inexperience and reluctance to ask or take advice.' And then followed the remark already quoted about Winifred's change of quarters.

Hertha sighed.

'I do feel terribly sorry to have involved Mr Montague so uncomfortably,' she said. 'Even now I feel as if I could shake Winifred with pleasure.'

She took the letter out of her bag to read it again. She did not own to herself that in the postscript—for there was a postscript—lay its greatest interest. Yet her eyes dwelt on the two or three lines as if they would read in them more, far more, than was there.

'I think I must tell you,' wrote her old friend, 'that at last, after all these years, I have heard from Austin. He writes cheerfully, and hopes to be able to return home for good next autumn. He is not married.'

But Hertha folded the page and replaced the letter resolutely in the envelope.

'No,' she said to herself, 'I must not think of him at all. After all these years, as Mr Montague says, it would be worse than folly, utter madness, to risk reopening the old wounds.'

And Hertha knew how to use a mental lock and key.

Still, all through the weeks and months that followed—through the fatigue and not infrequent trials and annoyances of her own almost overwhelmingly busy life—through her newly awakened interest in, and friendship for, the family at White Turrets—through *everything*, there ran, like the rippling of an all but inaudible brook in the summer time, a little acknowledged refrain of gladness, of hope. And the words which were set to this fairy music were always the same. 'Austin is coming home for good next autumn. He is not married.'

Celia, pretty Celia, as Hertha called her to herself, joined Miss Norreys before long, as arranged. Long afterwards—*always* afterwards, perhaps I should say—Hertha came to see what a happy thing for her at this juncture had been the advent into her own daily life of this fresh, enthusiastic, yet thoughtful young nature. They suited each other admirably. Celia was so entirely in earnest, so forgetful of self in her work, so grateful for the advantages she owed in considerable measure to her friend, that she seemed never in the way. She had, of course, many difficulties to contend with, for even genius cannot walk along a royal road for many steps together; then come the

rough bits, the flat, dull, monotonous stretches, when one seems to be making no way, and worst, yet best of all, perhaps, the ever-increasing consciousness of falling short of one's ever ascending ideal.

But by degrees the great fact came to be incontestable—the genius was there.

And Winifred, for her part, kept her promise man—or womanfully. She had not boasted in saying she was not one to do things by halves. She set her shoulder to the wheel of the duties she had never before taken any real interest in. There came up to Celia now and then lists of appallingly clever books on eminently practical subjects, all directly or indirectly connected with the management, on the best possible lines, of a large estate.

And when Celia returned to London again, after a happy Christmastide at White Turrets the following winter, her report was most encouraging.

'I cannot tell you how well Winifred is getting on,' she said, 'and how excellently she does everything. And with her as his more than right hand, papa seems a different being. She really *is* very clever.'

'I am sure of it,' Miss Norreys replied warmly.

'And the queer thing is, that though she has

never been so useful in her life, she is so much less self-confident,' said Celia. 'She is, oh, so *much* softer and more sympathising!'

'I think that is natural. She is no longer at war with herself, and unconsciously on the defensive,' replied the elder woman.

'But is it not delightful to you to think that it is really all *your* doing, dear Hertha?' asked Celia.

Hertha smiled.

'I do not feel that it was,' she said. 'At least, my hands were strengthened very strangely. I—Celia,' she broke off abruptly, 'I want to ask you something. Has the White Weeper been heard of or seen of late?'

'No, I believe not once,' said Celia in surprise.

Hertha bent her head in sign of satisfaction.

'I thought so,' she said. 'Celia,' she went on, 'I think I will tell you now what I have never told any one but Winifred.'

And she related the story of her strange experience that moonlight night at White Turrets.

Celia listened breathlessly, her face growing a shade paler.

'How extraordinary, *how* strange!' she exclaimed. 'And you think Winifred was really influenced by it?'

'At least she did not mock at it—not in the very slightest,' said Hertha. 'And—there was something more, that day she fainted, you remember?'

'Yes,' said Celia.

'Did she never tell you what she had felt?' And Hertha repeated what Winifred had told her.

Celia shook her head.

'No, she never told me. She knows I have always been so frightened about it. But—I scarcely see why she came, or tried to come, to Winifred herself, when the point *was* gained and she had given in?'

'Ah—I must tell you the rest, and this I think impressed your sister most of all. A day or two after I returned to London, after that Easter time—I went, at her request, to collect her things and pay some money *she* thought due to the people she had lodged with. What do you think I found? A deserted house—in the possession of the police. There had been a fire the night but one before, caused, no doubt, by the people themselves, for they were a very undesirable lot. They had all escaped, however, as they lived below; but the upper rooms, the very rooms Winifred had had, were literally gutted—in a state of black, charred desolation. We cannot say, of course,

but when I explained my errand, the policeman said the lady should be thankful that she had been prevented returning. "Ten to one if she could have been got out alive," he said.'

'Oh, Hertha!' exclaimed Celia, horror-struck. 'And you told Winifred?'

'Yes, though not immediately. She was still ill when it happened. But I think it impressed her exceedingly. Still, as she has not told you about it, it may be as well never to mention it.'

'I will never do so,' said Celia. 'But I think I shall never feel *afraid* of the White Weeper again.'

Then she went on to tell her friend about Louise and Lennox in their own house, their marriage having taken place the preceding autumn.

'They are as happy as the good people in a fairy tale,' she said.

When Celia went home the next time—a little more than a year after she had joined Miss Norreys, she took with her an astonishing piece of news. Hertha, Winifred's typical, self-dependent woman, *Hertha*, was going to be married!

'It is an old story,' said Celia, calmly. 'An old story, ending very beautifully, *I* think. I cannot tell you much, for I do not know the whole.

But they were separated for years, through nobody's fault exactly, and neither has ever cared for any one else,' she added simply.

'All the same,' said Winifred, 'I am just a *little* disappointed in her.'

Celia's own plans were not materially affected by this unexpected event, as, having by this time gathered experience, she was able to go on with her studies without actually sharing her friend's home. Before long, those studies led her further afield for a time. But this sketch, or rough outline, rather—not worthy of the name of a story—of some girls' experiences, must come to an end without chronicling the successes of the young painter, of whom great things are prophesied.

There *are* those, too, who predict that Celia Maryon is about to try the experiment of reconciling the claims and duties of married life with those of a special vocation. And if it be possible to succeed in so doing, assuredly no woman could have a wiser, less exacting, and more sympathising husband than the one whom rumour has selected for her—Eric Balderson.

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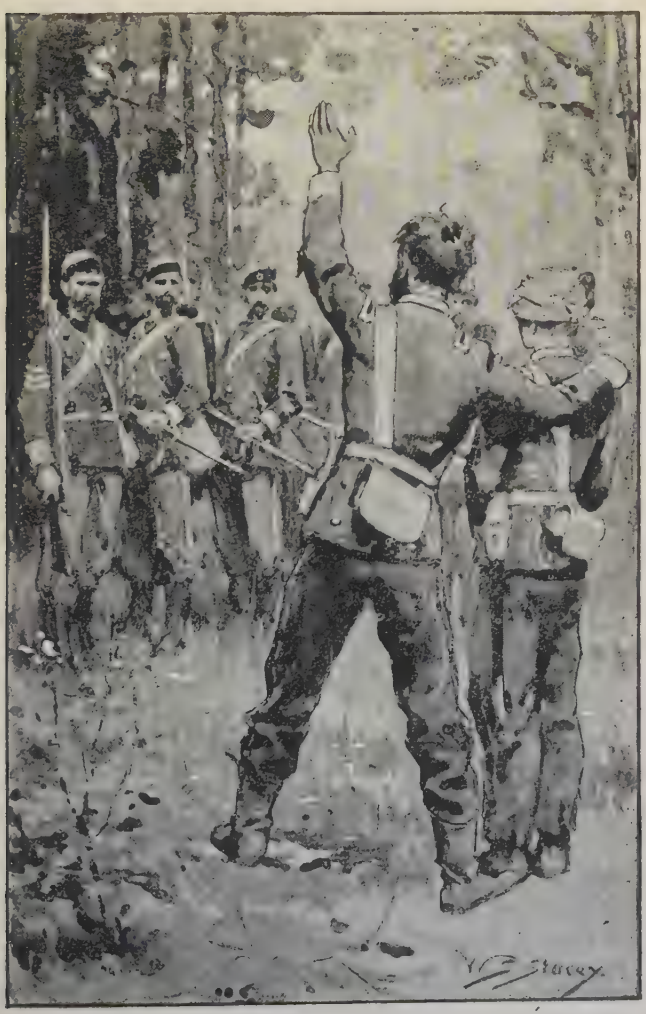

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